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Restorative Biophilic Design

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The Heart's Eye

Awe: A feeling of respect, reverence and wonder in the presence of something powerful, sacred or sublime.

"The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed."

~Albert Einstein

Goose bumps, heart racing, a slight chill running down our spine. The heart's eye has been touched. Awe is perhaps our most instantly transformative emotion. A kind of shock to the system. Heightened awareness and total immersion in the experience of a stand-still moment. Stopped in our tracks, interrupted, intercepted, suspended, spell-bound, dumb-founded,we are startled into recognition of something profound. We are "in awe." We are in it.

Chances are, we will never forget that moment. Chances are, we will never forget that place.

PHOTO ABOVE: Mont Saint-Michel



Paul and Ben in the Bruder-Klaus Chapel by Peter Zumthor, Germany. Photo by Klaus Schmitz-Gielsdorf.

Yes, but why?

Given that evolution has designed us for survival, what is the 'purpose' of awe? In his study '*AWE: For Altruism and Health?*' Dacher Keltner, Prof. of Psychology at the Berkley Social Interaction Lab, **has answered the question** this way:

“In the course of our evolution, we became a most social species. This shift to more collective living required a new balancing act, that between the gratification of self-interest and an orientation toward enhancing the welfare of others. Brief experiences of awe redefine the self in terms of the collective and orient our actions toward the interests of others.”

His study found, that “...awe leads people to cooperate, share resources, and sacrifice for others, all of which are requirements for our collective life.”

All of which are requirements to solve our collective problems sustainably.



Photo Credit: Corey Rich.

Self-Transcendence

Awe appears to be a socializing if not transformative experience, a deeply socializing emotion. Lasting sustainability can only be achieved through emotional connection.

In their essay '*Awe and the Experience of Self Transcendence*' Prof. of Psychology Jesse Graham & Poet Sarah Estes put it this way:

"...awe is part of a set of "self-transcendent" emotions, along with compassion, admiration, elevation, and gratitude. Awe may thus be an adaptive part of our fundamentally social nature. Our capacity for awe and wonder lets us lose ourselves—for a time—in something larger, whether that something be nature, the collective, or the divine."

Awe inspiring places incorporate several **biophilic patterns: mystery, curiosity, discovery, surprise, wonder**, even the pattern of **risk/peril**, since any transformative experience can be expansive to the point of feeling slightly unsettling at first. In awe, a paradigm shift is taking place.

Sustainability requires a paradigm shift.



Luxor Temple, Egypt, built 1400 BC

Awe strengthens Immune Function

Dr. Keltner explains:

"The focus in our lab is on one branch of the immune system known as the cytokine system.... Psychology is discovering that a hyperactive cytokine response renders the individual chronically sick and vulnerable to disease, a process that may be involved in how poverty shortens lives. Jennifer Stellar from our lab recently documented that of all the positive emotions humans experience, only awe predicted reduced levels of cytokines."

Equity, sustainability, well-being: three sides of the same coin.



Northwaters Wilderness Camp, Lake Temagami, Canada

The Daily Awe

A recent study from the Berkeley Social Interaction Lab speaks to the promise of daily awe:

" people feel that they are in the presence of something vast that they do not immediately comprehend. For example, seeing gold and red autumn leaves pirouette to the ground in a light wind... Intriguingly, each burst of daily awe predicted greater well-being and curiosity weeks later."

So, let's challenge ourselves to expand beyond the mundane, to flourish beyond the merely efficient, beyond the merely rational, beyond the merely explicit..... not into the flamboyant, or the frivolous, but into the realm of the mysterious, the realm of the sublime, into the ambiguous and above all: into the beautiful.

Lets give ourselves permission to be in Awe.



The Daily Awe. Photo by Sophia BenJeddi.



Helena in Awe. Photo by Sophia BenJeddi.

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