



Can Awe Experiences Break Political Gridlock?

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

First, let me say this is a column about behavioral health, not politics. But recent research in behavioral health reveals a psychological process that could help in politics.

That process concerns our experience of awe. Awe is defined as an overwhelming feeling of reverence, admiration, or fear produced by something which is grand, sublime, or extremely powerful.

There has been some interesting research in the past few years about the benefits of awe experiences and what these mean in our lives. For example, when we experience awe, our normal perception of the world stops for a moment. We find ourselves immersed in something vast, something that's momentarily greater than our comprehension can manage.

We're struck with wonder. We take pause. Our mind stops for a moment as we take in the new experience. And something about this seems to make us behave with more cooperation and helpfulness.

Researchers Melanie Rudd, Kathleen Vohs, and Jennifer Aaker, in their article in *Psychological Science*, define awe as a distinct emotion with two specific features: "First, awe involves perceptual vastness, which is the sense that one has encountered something immense in size, number, scope, complexity, ability, or social bearing (e.g., fame, authority). Second, awe stimulates a need for accommodation; that is, it alters one's understanding of the world."

When in awe, our recognition of vastness forces us to focus on the larger whole. Our mind makes new connections. We might experience awe during a natural event such as a beautiful sunrise, or when experiencing a sublime personal transition such as childbirth, or encountering a breathtaking feature in the world such as viewing a majestic mountain range from a scenic overlook, or upon meeting someone famous such as the pope or the president.

Psychologists are now studying this kind of experience and the effect it has on us. Their research shows that awe experiences engender feelings within us that connect us to the world and to each other. We might feel "more at one with the world" or "more at one with another person."

Some of the research has focused specifically on the connection we feel with others. It shows that awe experiences actually bind us to our fellow humans and motivate us to act in a collaborative way. As reported in the *New York Times*, psychology professors at University of California, Paul Piff and Dacher Keltner, found in an experiment that people who had more awe experiences in their lives acted in more generous ways toward others. This proved to be the case even when the other person was a stranger.

In another study by Piff and Keltner, people were placed in a beautiful visual setting that inspired awe while other people (the control group) were exposed to a plain building. They found that people who spent time in the awe inspiring setting became more helpful toward others than those in the control group.

So, it certainly seems that the psychological benefits of awe are good for us as individuals, and good for how we treat others. Imagine for a moment, our congressmen in Washington, DC, taking pause before each session of congress to have at least one awe experience. Let's say, they stood at the end of Capitol Mall and took in the view, allowing themselves to feel the utter grandeur of that scene. Or, during cherry blossom season, before making any decisions on the hill, they took a leisurely stroll through the fragrant, flowering trees. If all our congressmen were committed to this, and experienced that awe, maybe they would work together to find solutions to the many challenges they are now so unsuccessful at resolving. .

Other Benefits of Awe

In a number of other studies on awe and what it does for us, researchers have shown that awe experiences actually expand our perception of time. After experiencing awe, people had the feeling that they had more time available to them. They felt less rushed. This could benefit most everybody. On a day-to-day basis, so many of us over-book ourselves and over-extend ourselves in what we percieve to be a fast-paced, non-stop world.

In another study by Piff and Keltner people who had recently experienced awe became more pro-social. They offered more of their time to help someone else. This compared to people who did not have recent awe experiences, who offered less of their time.

Other research reveals that awe-inspired individuals see the world a little differently. They tend to be more interested in experiential activities than in material goods. They tend to see the whole picture instead of specific parts.

But in today's world, we may be losing our ability to experience awe. Modern society seems to be set up this way. We keep "paving paradise and putting up parking lots." We have to travel farther and farther to experience a natural setting. Furthermore, we keep connecting to the world through electronic devices rather than experiencing the world directly. Is it possible to feel awe from a social media or internet connection? How often for example do we sit peacefully in a beautiful setting and take in the surroundings?

Hopefully, as a society, we don't become so deprived of awe that we lose its behavioral benefits.

What do you think? Is it worth cultivating more awe experiences in your life? Is it worth recommending the same to our politicians?

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