



have gone, even though I've always worn a clinical psychology hat, and I certainly work with a lot of clients, and otherwise, doing more traditional work that's been my passion is really helping both individuals, organizations, clients that I work with live their best life, which to me goes beyond just the absence of suffering, but the presence of something more. So that's what really let me to write my previous books, *Real Happiness*, *The Happiness Toolbox*, and more recently focused in on awe and wonder and my more recent book *Awestruck*. But to me, this is the question of what life is all about, how do we help ourselves and the people we love most, achieve well-being and a satisfying life, and a sense of meaning and purpose, and connection and belonging and that's really what it's all about, and that's become an incredible passion for mine to learn about it, but also share that information with people.

**Jen:** And it sounds like we have similar passions. So let's talk about your most recent book, *Awestruck*, in particular about awe, you and I share a common connection I think with the Dr. Dacher Keltner, he has been on the show as well and I know that you talk about him in the book of *Awestruck* and his research and his work. Tell me about awe and wonder, what's the difference between the two and what kind of led you to write about it, because as you talk about it, it isn't kind of a common emotion that's commonplace in in our language and in our society today?

**Jonah:** Yeah, it's a great question. It's strange because it is this common universal human emotion really has been left out of the picture for most of certainly in a formal sense of the research on emotions and well-being. I've always had this passion for learning about different ingredients of the good life and whether that would be something like mindfulness or self-compassion, gratitude. And so a lot of my work focused on that, but I remember it was a few years ago, 2018 I believe, and I had the good fortune of being at that, you know, way back when you could actually travel and go places, in the island of Saint John in the Caribbean, beautiful place, been there once, but there was this incredibly powerful rain storm that came through very, very suddenly, and we hustled to get back towards the car and the next thing I know, I looked back up behind me, and the rain had cleared and there was this just incredible double rainbow that was over the, just as crystal clear blue water of the Bay in that North Shore side of the island. And I just had this moment of goosebumps of this recognition of being part of something bigger than myself and I thought to myself in that moment, what is this? I mean, I know this is wonder, this is awe, but has this really been looked at, has this been examined, has this been written about, because I love to write. And when we went back that night to this cottage we were staying in and 56K dial-up modem, it felt like I spent the next few hours looking at, all that I could have what had been done in terms of this research and of course people like Dr. Keltner showed up and there had been a recent upsurge of academic research on it, but nothing in terms of like the how to and that's really my passion is helping people, helping the general public understand what are these concepts that we're talking about in a straightforward way, but how do you employ them in your life? And it was that night that I really started to sketch out the idea for my book and to start to explore it a little bit more. To answer your question in terms of what this term even means because you can obviously hear that word, it can mean a lot of different things to a lot of different people. I think of informal and more formal definitions of it, so informally those moments in life where we feel small yet connected to something much bigger than us. It's the moments that give us goosebumps, it's the moments where we want to pinch ourselves, it's the moments that make us go wow. So I think that's kind of what often that shorthand would get people to understand. If you look at it a step deeper, researchers who study those, of course people like Dr. Keltner, but also Lani Shiota, and Paul Piff and many other really awesome people that are doing this work. They talk about it as being combine these two separate but interconnected ingredients. The first is that we encounter something that's vast, something that's bigger than ourselves, whether it's in the physical realm or the idea realm, right? So just like vast could be the

Grand Canyon, it could also be the capacity of someone's courage and resilience in the face of hardship or someone's humanity. So vastness is the first piece and then the second is what's called transcendence or accommodation. You see both of those words show up in this literature, but it essentially means that something about this experience makes me step back and reevaluate things. It challenges what I thought I knew about the world, about myself, about other people, so it's an adopting quality. There's a fact that I encounter something, but it also pushes me outside my status quo in some sense, and you put those two together and that's really from an academic standpoint what it's thought of as awe, but I also think that just as effectively is still remind people, it's those moments that we feel small yet connected.

**Jen:** You've talked about some physical indicators of feeling awe, goosebumps, but how do you know when you're feeling awe versus like something else like amazement or admiration, how do you differentiate, I guess between those emotions or do you need to differentiate between those emotions, I guess?

**Jonah:** Good, and perhaps for many purposes, you don't. I always think of it in terms of Venn diagrams in the sense that many of these concepts and these constructs overlap, being mindful in the present moment is often overlapped with feeling grateful for something in the present moment. For example, there is overlap, I would say one thing that separates awe from something like amazement would be, you know, there are things that we can be amazed about, but don't necessarily have that same element of scale to them, you know, we're not necessarily in the presence of something bigger than us in that sense. Wonder is a word that you mentioned earlier and actually in most of this literature, those two concepts do tend to be collapsed into awe, so there's not a huge differentiation between awe and wonder. I would say that one area where they maybe depart is you hear the word wonder and it always tends to have, at least in my experience, pretty positive connotations, in the sense of wonder, in the sense of marveling at something, whereas awe doesn't inherently have to just apply to good things and you can have awe in the face of negative parts of life, you can have awe in the face of threat, in the face of, you know, just to name a couple of examples, natural disaster. I was in New York during 9/11, I think there was an awe-full quality to that, it's not something you'd ever want to repeat, but that sense of like this is something way beyond my comprehension happening here and that threat that scale to it. So negative awe is a thing....

**Jen:** So probably safe to say that most people have experienced some sort of negative awe over the pandemic in the last 14 or 15 months, I would say.

**Jonah:** I'd say it's a perfect example. I mean tragically often times, but yeah, the idea that we could be essentially worldwide brought to our knees by something we can't see is, there's an awe quality to that for sure even though...

**Jen:** It's so true. I mean until you said it, I've always thought about awe in a very positive way. I've never actually thought about awe in a negative connotation, but it's so true, so you said that awe is often underappreciated, and I think you've talked about it a little bit already, but let's dig into that.

**Jonah:** Yeah, I think part of it is with a lot of emotions. We can pretty easily trace why do we all experience this like you think about a universal human emotion like fear or love or anger and it's easy to say from that evolutionary psychology lens, but why do we all experience that it keeps us safe from threat? It helps us forward social bonds, but all is this tricky universal emotion, it's a little less obvious on the surface of, but why is it something that's now been studied in 40 plus countries and cultures around the world and everyone talks about this important part of who we are? But you know, I think for one thing it does some really interesting things for us that lead me to feel like it's underappreciated. And if you look at some of the benefits of all, like three of the benefits of all right off the bat, I like to call the

3C's of all connection, compassion, and curiosity. Making see this in all kinds of interesting studies, fascinating research that's been done is when a person experiences an experience of awe, they feel more connected to other people. So, it fosters a feeling of connection which you know we all know we need during this much of the past year, when we've often felt so isolated. It leads to greater altruism and compassion, so we become more attuned to other people suffering and needs actually makes people more generous, interestingly enough and it also like we talked about, makes more curious, so connection, compassion, and curiosity are three of those core hallmark benefits of all that you see time and time again. But it goes way beyond that to, you know, there's boosts to our emotional states in terms of positive emotions. There's a feeling of being small yet connected to the world around us and other people. It makes people less materialistic. So, it actually orients us to deeper and more meaningful values, didn't been shown to lower not only overall stress levels, but even symptoms of posttraumatic stress seem to respond to these experiences of awe and wonder. There's many more, but even just on a psychological benefit level, these incredible outcomes linked with awe, we're just starting to scratch the surface of that have really big implications. I think a lot of untapped potential, you might say to awe as well.

**Jen:** So, is awe fleeting, you know, I mean, I guess I think of on a lot of the examples that we've talked about are things that happen in nature and by the way, I kind of smiled to myself when you talked about the rain storm in Saint John because I live in South Florida and that's the tropics for you. You know this unexpected rainstorm comes in and you know, looks like the world is coming to an end and five minutes later, there's amazing rainbow. So, I related to that experience. I think childbirth for a lot of people probably creates a sense of awe, but these are all kind of fleeting experiences or moments in our life, so how do we make sure that we make the most of it and savor it when it happens? And I guess, is it true that awe is leading.

**Jonah:** Yes, it typically is. Couple of things come to mind. One is you spoke to all the different parts of life that can give us this feeling. You know nature versus holding a child for the first time are seemingly very different experiences that they can bring that feeling about. Noticing something like how many things in my immediate field of vision would be mind blowing to somebody 500 years ago, and that's another example of how we often look at. Kinds of things, so we can experience it through many different avenues, but I would say one thing is these moments are fleeting, but their effects seemingly aren't, and I think that's a really important nuance to it. But you're right, like many times when I think of some of my peak all moments in life. Maybe even probably lasted all of 5 to 7 seconds in the moment, right? Like they are very, very brief and then you get in your head and then you are on to the next thing. But what some studies have shown is that even a couple of weeks later you can still detect ripple effects in terms of our mood, in terms of our stress level, even in terms of things like our body's inflammatory response, that powerful moments of all especially seem to have lasting effects both in our mind and our body and it can even last upwards of a couple of weeks. For those poignant moments, which is really surprising. So, the moment itself is very fleeting, but those effects can last. And I think the other piece that comes to mind from what you're mentioning is, it becomes so important for us to find ways to notice these experience on a small level, but there's capital A awe and then there's lowercase a awe and that's not a technical definition, but we think it all often is, you know, I'm going to go visit the Eiffel Tower and that could be perfectly inspiring. But I think just as important is for folks to remember that each and every day we actually encounter things that are beautiful, magical, miraculous, inspiring, but we often don't see them in that light. I think when I woke up this morning and I checked my email and I exchanged messages, somebody who's halfway around the world and my coffee was ready when I woke up magically and I had a roof over my head and my alarm clock was in my phone, which has more computing power in it than what launched the Apollo mission quite literally, and all of these are

incredible, but we don't tend to think of them that way. So, a lot of it is about awareness and we're learning and training ourselves to see the world through new eyes to notice those small moments that we so often gloss over, but are really incredible and when we learn to see them as the gifts that they are, it goes in an incredibly long way as well.

**Jen:** Yeah, I mean I'm just thinking that what you said is so powerful, because so often we absolutely gloss over those things. I think, especially when it comes to the technology that we use. I think more often than not, we probably feel frustration when it's not working versus awe, when it is working exactly how it's supposed to right and that like it is, that's kind of where my head was going. So, when it comes to these feelings of awe or these moments of awe is recalling those moments. Does that have the same impact or is that something completely different?

**Jonah:** That is a wonderful question and I think the answer is close enough. And by the way, I think this is an even a broader point that I think listeners might want to keep in mind. When we think about something or we visualize something, this is one of the reasons why visualization exercises can actually be really powerful. It does create in us and usually it's hard to put a number on it, but I've heard some estimates around 60 to 70% of the same reactions throughout our brain or nervous system and our body as when that thing was really happening. Now the problem is you know it's like a superpower if you think about it, but we often use that superpower for bad, for lack of a better term and all we have to do is think about the last time that we started to really ruminate on and dwell on something that didn't go well, and when you think about it, you start to actually feel tense and you feel your heart rate go up and you feel your mood sync. That thing is not happening right in front of us, but in our mind it is, and in many ways like with a lot of things in Buddhism, they were on this couple of thousand years ago, they talked about it in terms of the first arrow and the second arrow and the first arrow are the things that happened to us in life. The idea is that if we're hit by an arrow, would that hurt? But then if we're hit by another arrow in the same place, will that hurt even more and the first arrow, things that happen to us, we have very little control over that. The second, is it the mind's tendency to relive, replay, latch onto, and that is actually something we have a lot more control over. So, using that same mental muscle, but doing it for something like awe for example like reliving those past moments, having pictures around that remind us of those special memories, having an awe journal, talking, and sharing about it with somebody. All of those types of efforts create many of those same neural pathways and reactions in our body is when the experience is happening. Same goes for gratitude, moments of self-kindness towards ourselves, selfcare, connection that we can actually learn to use this super power of the mind in a way that's going to be giving us peace and strength and wellbeing as opposed to more down the road of rumination, which we tend to do.

**Jen:** I'm processing that because I feel like that's something that I need to, it's a mindset shift though, right? I mean because you're right in that we tend to ruminate on the negative versus how powerful is it to "ruminate" on the positive right over the things, the moments in our life that brought us awe and joy. And I guess I just never really thought about it like that.

**Jonah:** I don't think you are alone, I mean this is a constant reminder for me too. And if those listeners who you noticed like, oh I do the opposite and you don't keep in mind there's good reason for that, right? Like we're designed to survive, not to feel good, and oftentimes those go across purposes, so being alert to threat and remembering things that happen, our brain even has this what they call a negativity bias where negative events stick with us a lot longer and more intensely than positive ones. So, I don't think you're alone in that, I'm certainly in that same boat, but to that point it really is about intention and maybe becoming 1% better at a time with it and just illuminating a little lesson going another way to recall the good a little bit more, scheduling time to really savor the good moments of our

day. Setting aside 2 minutes to visualize a moment where we felt loved and connected and so forth. And it's really bit by bit that we start to change these habits and actually even on a brain base level change our brain as well.

**Jen:** So, can we as human beings actually create awe? Can we actually cultivate it or create it? Or is it just kind of these serendipitous moments that happen to us?

**Jonah:** My mind is going a couple of places here, but I would just add, what gives one person awe might make another person shrug. I had a friend not too long ago, a couple of years ago at this time, but I was out in California. Good friend of mine from childhood and he was like, I'm back, I will be out in California, let's do something to, show me around like what it's like out there. So, I thought to myself, well I really love going to the Redwood forests and that to me is this quintessential California thing, 350 foot tall trees, they've been around for a couple of 1000 years like this is, you know, my spiritual experience. So, I thought to myself that would be a great thing for a New Yorker who's never been here to see. So, I take my friend to this beautiful place called Muir Woods and it's this Redwood Grove. And about 10 minutes in I'm sitting there in rapt attention, looking around, he turns to me and he says so is there anything else to see here besides trees? And I don't think about that just went totally flat. So, with the recognition that we're all different. But I tend to think of this to your question is we want to give ourselves more opportunities. There is not a guarantee, but if I go to the Grand Canyon, I'll feel a sense of awe, so it is my mindset when I engage with friends, but some of it's just that individual difference, right? A beautiful symphony might evoke a feeling of wondering you, but maybe not so much in me depending on our tastes in music, right? So, in my book I go over about 65 or so different practices and tips and suggestions and strategies to find more awe in different domains of life. But again, what we want to do is really experiment. But yeah, I'll just name a few examples, I think finding...broadly speaking nature is a great place for awe, so that could be going out into your natural spaces. It could be looking up at cloud for machines. It could be the setting sun just noticing with that how that light changes. So, there's different ways with changing colors of the leaves in nature. There's also other people, when we feel those moments of love and connection when we look at the world through a child's eyes, when we share a moment of incredible beauty with somebody that can evoke a feeling of awe, of course. Being inspired by people, so thinking about who over the past year has been on the front lines of the fight against Covid, who in recent years people that we know or don't know who have been fighting to make the world a better place. Who are the people whose courage in the face of illness inspires us and there's no shortage of people that we can feel uplifted by and that can give us a sense of wonder as well. Oftentimes, the mental side of things too. Like when we pause, and we recognize that there are more stars up above than there are grains of sand on Earth. That is mind-blowing, right? So, we're not actually going up and counting those, but just that knowledge you only think about all of the different systems in our body that have to work in unison and harmony just for our heart to beat for us to be here to for us to have consciousness the way we do or all of the things that had to align for us to even be here right now as an individual, you know the fact that the earth has to be placed exactly where it is in terms of distance from the sun. But all of our ancestors have to survive long enough to pass their genes along and all the things have to line up just so like the odds of existing are as close to the as close to zero as you get without being zero and yet here we are. And that's mind-blowing. So part of it, there's many, many arts and architecture we talked about as well, of course.

**Jen:** Those are manmade too, so I guess and we can actually create awe right?

**Jonah:** Beautiful music, beautiful art, architecture to your point, athletics. These are all things that can give us a sense of you know when you feel like you're witnessing something that's special and magical and rare. So yeah, we can definitely, as human beings either use awe to inspire us on a creative level, so

use those moments to sort of have that creative spark or awe creation broadly speaking, can invoke awe and other people. So, there's many ways that this can go.

**Jen:** And so what are your kind of go to strategies to make sure that you are bringing awe into your into your daily life or maybe your weekly life.

**Jonah:** Great question. I think the one that I tend to really try to remember and try to call to mind one is I am somebody that really, and this surprises me in many ways coming from, growing up in Brooklyn for the first couple of decades of my life. I'm somebody that gets a lot of this through nature, so I really go out of my way to connect whether it's doing hiking or visiting nearby parks, will just be around green space to just put myself. So, nature is definitely one for me, but also through travel and going to some beautiful national parks and places like that when I'm able to is a huge part for me. I'm definitely somebody in terms of the lower case awe or everyday awe, but I really do make a habit of pausing every once in a while, and just wherever I find myself, whether it's in my home, at work, or really anywhere driving and I stopped and I pause, and I realize how many things can I actually identify in my field of vision that are actually mind-blowing to 99.9% of the human experience. That's something I try to remind myself out and just the fact that I'm looking around this room right now and seeing so many things that are just incredible through that lens. And the existence piece, the timelessness piece that I mentioned were even during difficult moments, remembering how rare the gift this whole thing called life is the fact that the odds are incredibly stacked against any of us being here and yet here we are, that even those painful moments in many ways are, you know, gifts that are not afforded to everybody. Just the ability to grow older is a gift. On and on we go, so I try to really use together a gratitude practice with awe as well through them.

**Jen:** Yeah I love that and I think that you know the everyday awe, I need to cultivate more of that because I think we just tend to take those things for granted, you know flip the light switch and the and the light turns on and like I said, you know when you flip the light switch and the light switch doesn't turn on, you tend to get frustrated instead of perhaps maybe getting curious as to okay, what's really going on here and how do I kind of step back and realize that, 99% of the time when the light switch does turn on the lights up, I should be in awe and I should be appreciative or more grateful for what I have. For most of us, live in a world of abundance, but we just take that abundance for granted I think.

**Jonah:** There's this phenomenon, as some listeners might be familiar with, called hedonic adaptation, we get used to good things essentially, and we're all conditioned to do that, so I definitely hope that none of this is interpreted by anybody as a scolding in any sense. I think we're all wired this way and really the challenge becomes how do I gently shift out of that mindset where I'm not just taking things for granted and not just on to the next thing, but where I'm actually appreciative of that. I had a moment recently with our Internet here and you know I had to restart the router and it took 7 minutes to fully reboot and I felt myself getting very frustrated, why don't things ever work the way that they're supposed to? And then I tried to think when's the last time I had to reboot this router? And most of the days throughout this, I've been able to work from here and do things, and that's pretty amazing. And yet I would find myself getting frustrated. So, you catch yourself and it's totally natural and normal. But then you bring yourself back and I think you know we talked about savoring the good innocence and savoring all moments. That to me is a is a real way to build this mental muscle too, whether it's through mental snapshots, souvenirs, mementos, photos, just going out of our way to hold on to and I always have the vision in my mind of an accordion where we take a single experience instead of it just being a single experience, we stretch it out, and that's what we're doing with so many of these things.

**Jen:** Wow, well this has been I mean so much insight, really enlightening I feel like I need time to process it all and start to embed some of these into my own life. So, one final question for you, Jonah, is something that I ask all of my guests. What is your definition of wellbeing? I feel like you got a leg up on this one.

**Jonah:** I should, but yeah I think wellbeing is one of those terms that means something different to all of us. But I think it's...I tend to come back to this very simple mindset where it's a combination of feeling good and doing good. But I think sometimes if we're just focusing on pleasure and hedonics happiness, but we miss out on that depth it's an incomplete life. If we're constantly striving and trying to do good, but there's an absence of joy and connection and all that and then we're going to feel kind of languishing in a way, and I think thinking of that combination of generally day-to-day satisfied with life, generally day-to-day feeling good, more so than not, but I'm also connected to something that's bigger than just me. I think when you put all that together, feeling good and doing good combined as my shorthand for wellbeing.

**Jen:** I like it, I'll take it, we're going to add it to the list. Jonah, thank you so much for this conversation. I really enjoyed it. I know the listeners are going to get a lot out of it as I know I did, so I appreciate you taking the time.

**Jonah:** Thank you.

**Jen:** I'm so grateful Jonah could be with us today to talk about awe and wonder.

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