

The Four Aces: Awakening to Happiness

Enhance Your Happiness Today

4 Simple Keys to Unlock Your Daily Joy and
A Path to An Awesome Life

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About The Author

Christian is a happiness expert who speaks four languages. He is an entrepreneur, a psychology and education researcher, a world-traveller and an average time-waister—what else do we have to waist anyway? He writes fiction, nonfiction and poetry. His happiness book series is the cumulation of his research, reading, personal journey and life experiences of others with whom he constantly connects with deeply and sincerely. In this book, he explains the process of awareness, acceptance, appreciation and awe (4As) to enhance people's daily lives around the globe. He has asked the question "what makes you happy?" to thousands of people from all walks of life in 150 countries and came up with more than a few insights.

He studied and taught at top Canadian universities. He is awake—not woke—, and still values diversity, inclusion and a good tea infusion. He showed resilience and learned from personal adversity (aka life's university). A constant learner with unstoppable curiosity, he has made is life mission to share his wisdom in digestible and practical tools for unadulterated joy, altruism and kindness. He demystified different ways our ego and collective ego are present in our daily lives and how to fight survival-mode negativity and narrative brain biases in *Beyond Happy*. Now he goes straight to the point to give you the 4As or 4 Aces you should have up your sleeves at all times.

Christian's profound yet simple teaching has helped countless people better their relationships, find courage and be inspired with increased consciousness. His knowledge of anthropology, business, history, psychology, technology, health and neuroscience, coupled with his extensive traveling has made him a sought-after coach and teacher. He is available for keynote speaker engagements, group or individual mental training with a soft spot for the youth who are increasingly disenfranchised and disconnected.

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For Joy

Introduction

To laugh is to live profoundly... The sound of laughter is like the vaulted dome of a temple of happiness, that delectable trance of happiness, that ultimate affirmation of life.

-Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

Ever had an Aha moment? I had a few. Only to later find out I was still missing many pieces of the puzzle. I muddled through life making mistakes, collecting heartbreaks, beating my self up and betting on the wrong horses, questioning my choices. I also accomplished things that no one, even myself, thought I could do. I persisted and resisted. Now, I resist as little as possible and accept. I accept death, I accept defeat, I appreciate that my heart still beats. Baboom, baboom, many times a minute. Am I a baboon? We may come from some primate primitive past, but we are the species who invented the harpoon and went on to chase whales, the biggest animal on the planet. Ahab and his Moby Dick. I am in a life-or-death struggle for freedom with pure passion and intent. But what is freedom? Freedom from fear? Am I a buffoon? For all intent and purposes, yes. I laugh at life, death and all of it. Milan Kundera wrote *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Joke*. This book is partly the first and I am the second. Do not take me too seriously; I don't.

Why would one want to laugh and forget? Forget might be the wrong term—forgive a better one—, remember all you want but perhaps on your terms. I took a wrong turn—no, there is no wrong turns, just going forward. No regret, no remorse, no choice, just this. Life.

Laughter is the remedy to ennui and enemies alike. Laughter is so powerful in its on right, yet I will have a separate book on this subject, so although we may laugh together—or I alone; it is of little importance to me—, we are not going to learn to forget but rather learn to unlearn together. That's right, you may learn some valuable and life-changing insights in these pages, but the first advice I always give is unlearn first. Yes, unlearn almost everything. Forget your name, your age, your possessions, your position and your past so you can pass to the first step of the 4 Aces: awareness.

My hope is that you have many Aha moments in this book—and some haha moments maybe. Each laugh or letting go, will bring you closer to awareness and awakening. It may be uncomfortable at first. That is why acceptance—the second A—is so important. Complete acceptance that 1) you are a complete idiot (no worries, so I am) 2) you will never know enough 3) what you think you know is inadequate for true consistent practical peace and happiness 4) whenever you think you are close, try again. The good thing about it is that your heart is babooming and you are breathing so you will have many more tries—hopefully. And even though I may be your tour guide to this HA (happiness awakening) journey, I am most definitely still trying! HA... as in haha, that's funny. Even tour guides get lost, especially when they always seek uncharted territories.

After you unlearn and accept, you may learn a thing or two about appreciation—the third A—but I promise you will have the precious tools to keeping unlearning for the rest of your short life. Our brain unlearns and forgets automatically all the time, but it has a hard time unlearning and forgetting on purpose! When you are done with these useful banalities and if you haven't stopped reading this "A" some book to tend to one of your favorite life distractions, I will share one of the most unadvertised, best kept secret of happiness, cultivating awe—the final A. There is no test after the book, although life is a test and a blessing. Feel free however to take notes. More importantly, go in the world and practice these 4 Aces to the best of your ability and restart over every day with humility. Happiness awaits...

Chapter 1: Awareness

Each morning, we are born again. What we do today is what matters most. Your happiness awakens with your awareness.

- Buddha

Enter the awareness arena where nothing is given without a fair fight for freedom and felicity. Regardless of your current level of awareness or awakening, I hope you will find fragments you need in this chapter to climb the ladder until you do not need it anymore.

Awakening

I was walking home on a cold Canadian night and heard half a sentence from a young woman talking to her attentive friend. She said, “I deserve to be...” and they walked away from earshot before I heard the end of the phrase. I am not sure if she purposely stopped because I was possibly in hearing distance. Perhaps she was not comfortable sharing this to the world or perhaps she was unsure of what we deserved or deserved to “be”. Perhaps she was searching for her words or making a dramatic pause to get her friend’s undivided attention. We will never know what she thought she deserved and that is not the point of the story. As I walked past this stranger, I simply said to myself: “No, you don’t”.

Why would I think or say that knowing nothing about her or what she thought she deserved? I am not a person filled with compassion who wants to better the world and reduce suffering? Reducing suffering does not mean helping people get what they want or think they deserve. Reducing suffering starts with an often long and perhaps rude awakening. See, if I was her friend to whom she was confiding in, I might say: “No, I am really sorry to inform you: you deserve nothing, never have and never will.” Is that rude? It depends if you want to be awoken or continue sleeping.

The four words of the woman’s sensational sentence intro are all wrong.

“I” is the ego identity manifesting itself in full form.

“Deserve” is expectation and entitlement also based on ego

“To” points at an imaginary requirement or need.

“Be” is misconstrued as a goal while “being” is simple there constantly until death.

In short, there is nothing that she could say after that that would make sense to someone not sleeping and stuck. I will say it again, you, “I” and anyone deserve nothing. We do not deserve to be born, do not deserve to be loved, respected, recognized, rich, happy, praised, paid, cared for, or even alive.

Some may think that I am writing fiction or that some spiritual synchronicity is in place, yet I am convinced that it is rather the incredible ability of our brains to seek and see patterns when we are primed with purpose and attention. Not a week later in another neighborhood of my native Montreal I overheard in the streets another snippet of conversation—no I don’t usually go out eavesdropping on everyone! This one was with two older women briskly walking together in busy downtown, and one was saying to another: “I am very grateful to be...”

Again, I am not sure what she was been grateful for or grateful “to be”, and again the details do not matter. I am not even saying she was necessarily happier or wiser than the younger woman of days earlier, yet in that partial sentence, she was certainly closer to be awake.

What then is this awakening? And what is it to be “awake”?

Awake (not Woke)

When you finally wake up. What's next?

A small recap before we go any further in our happiness awakening and our four faithful Aces. My previous book *Beyond Happy* showed us 7Cs as ingredients of happiness and 8Ps as tools to assist in the journey. They are:

Contentment: Peaceful satisfaction with what is—present circumstances or situation—while being free of wanting more or different.

Connection: Intimate meaningful and positive bond with oneself, others, ideas, experiences and the world that creates understanding and belonging.

Compassion: The intention to reduce or alleviate all suffering with the awareness of our and others' many sources of suffering.

Compersion: Genuine joy experienced when witnessing others' apparent success, happiness or perceived privilege.

Courage: The willingness to take action and face uncertainty, fear, anxiety or adversity.

Curiosity: An eager appeal to explore, question, learn, and understand the world and experiences around us and within us.

Creativity: The ability to generate novel ideas, make unique connections, combat conformity, rearrange the world and express oneself in original ways.

Playfulness: A lighthearted approach to life that embraces spontaneity, joy, and experimentation without fear of external or self-judgment.

Presence: The practice of being fully engaged and aware in the current moment without dwelling on the past or worrying about the future.

Patience: The capacity to remain calm and accepting while enduring challenges, delays, or difficulties without becoming frustrated.

Passion: An intense emotional drive and enthusiasm that fuels dedication to pursuing what deeply matters to us, which could—and should—also be others.

Purpose: A clear sense of meaning and direction that guides our actions and gives significance to our life journey.

Perseverance: The determined continuation of effort and action despite obstacles, setbacks, or discouragement.

Positivity: The tendency to focus on opportunities, solutions, and favorable aspects of situations while maintaining an optimistic outlook.

Peace: A state of tranquility and harmony within oneself and in relation to the world, free from internal conflict and excessive worry.

We will delve into the 4As with detail in this book but let us look at some simple context for all of them here and seeing them as a logical path rather than mere mishmashes of useful ingredients and tools.

Awareness: The conscious recognition and understanding of thoughts, emotions, feelings, senses, surroundings, and experiences of self and other as they occur, as well as how they connect with concepts, contexts, observations, including humanity and existence.

Acceptance: The willing nonjudgemental acknowledgment of reality as it is, without resistance or demands for change.

Appreciation: The mindful recognition and gratitude for the value, qualities, or significance of someone or something.

Awe: A profound sense of wonder and reverence that expands our perspective and connects us to something greater than ourselves.

Let me tell you about the difference between being intellectually awake and being "woke"—it's like comparing a library where all the books are having a fabulous party together versus a very serious book club where only certain books are allowed in and they all have to agree with each other.

Being intellectually awake is like being that person at a buffet who's excited to try everything—even exotic Korean, Congolese or Mexican worms (as a dish, not just the mezcal moth marketing myth of the "tequila worm"!). You're genuinely curious about why people believe what they believe, even if it makes about as much sense to you as putting Nutella chocolate on pizza (which, by the way, you're also willing to try because hey, who knows?). Awareness involves incessant curiosity (7Cs). Your mind is like a bouncer at the world's most inclusive club: "Everyone's welcome! Bring your ideas, your weird theories, your questionable fashion choices—we'll examine them all!" The only rule? Check your judgment at the door, right next to that superiority complex you've been lugging around. There is no ego, no judgement, just open evaluation and elevation.

Meanwhile, being "woke" has become like belonging to a very exclusive restaurant that only serves one type of opinion, carefully prepared according to strict ideological guidelines. It's as if someone took the concept of being aware and conscious of social issues and turned it into a membership club where everyone must order the same dish and pretend it's the only food that exists. Imagine if your GPS only allowed you to turn right. Sure, you might eventually get where you're going, but you're missing out on a lot of potentially interesting left turns, and even Y and U-turns, along the way.

The real kicker is that true intellectual awakening is about embracing uncertainty like it's your slightly weird but lovable cousin—you don't have to agree with them, but you're curious (7Cs) about why they collect rubber ducks and name them after philosophers. It's about maintaining a state of perpetual "huh, that's interesting" rather than "that's wrong because it doesn't fit my predetermined worldview." In contrast, being "woke" has somehow evolved into a state where people are so certain they're uncertain about the right things that they've become certainly certain about everything. Wokeism is one of many false awakenings with assumptions taken as facts and people not believing the same as you taken as fools. Woke is an appearance of openness and inclusivity gone awry. We can certainly be more diverse and inclusive with real awareness.

When you are awake, you open your eyes and see. Awake means a flexible mean that sees beyond masks, veils and subtle subterfuges of everyday living. You see pass the blinders and remain kin, kind and nonjudgemental.

Awake = Alert + Open + Nonjudgement

Aube of Awareness

If you are in the habit of creating suffering for yourself, you are probably creating suffering for others too. These unconscious mind patterns tend to come to an end simply by making them conscious, by becoming aware of them as they happen.

— Eckart Tolle, Stillness Speaks

Suffering is a choice, conscious or unconscious. The more you become aware of that, the less you choose it. Awareness is inclined to decrease suffering and increase happiness in the long-term.

Aube is a mellifluous French word that means dawn. Awareness, unlike awakening, rarely comes as a shock. It is rather a cumulative process with some regression and hopefully more ascension. Like good relationships, it is work, almost constant work. One can perhaps see or sense that his, her or their awareness is increasing, yet should never take any comfort or complacency in that. Awareness is inherently uncomfortable and to some will remain even incomprehensible until they die. It does not mean that you should not try. Trust and enjoy the journey.

There is an analogy and story I like to tell people who want to be aware (or sometimes to those who aren't, can't or don't want to) for dramatic imagery. When I was a child, I had a red goldfish. That goldfish might have a name, but I do not remember now. I was about 5 years old. I loved that goldfish, and it brought me joy every day. One Christmas and New Year's my family went on vacation to see my grandparents in the hot Caribbean Sea. When I came back, I noticed there was something wrong with my beloved goldfish. I asked my dad a few times. "Dad, what is wrong with (insert goldfish name)?" and he gave several answers which I do not remember either. They must have not been too convincing or perhaps I was more aware than he thought, so after many days of the same question, father finally answered: "Look, it is not your goldfish, it is a new one."

"Why?" I demanded.

"I bought a new one because it saved money and time instead of asking our neighbor to do fish sitting and feeding for 3 weeks, rather than simply buy a new one on our return. Fish are cheap and see now you have a brand new one!"

"But I don't want a new one! Where is the old one?"

"I killed it, sorry."

"You killed my goldfish!?" (notice the child's possessive ego)

"Yes, I flushed it down the toilet."

"So, it died in the city sewage pipes and never even reached a lake to swim in?" I asked knowing the answer. (Yes, I also knew about indoor plumbing at five. My dad and granddad are engineers and I was as curious as a child as I still am as an adult.)

"Yes, son. You'll have to live with the new fish."

"But I loved the old one."

"You'll have to love the new one." (notice my father's authoritarian tone)

When the new one eventually died, because goldfish die (and so do we), I never asked my dad to buy a new one. Partially because I felt betrayed (I did not know any better) and partly because I had learned valuable lessons from this murderous treachery.

1. My father is a cold assassin and liar
2. Most people lie and some kill
3. Everyone dies, not just goldfish
4. Change is part of life, and you do not need to expect consistency (embrace impermanence)
5. I can get over the death of my beloved goldfish
6. I can love again and accept

Now, this is not the end of the story or analogy. Think now of the small, transparent, transient, fishbowl—or glamorous fish prison—this limited use and lifespan fish lived in. It was not only a physical prison but surely a mental one. How could a fish know about life, love, other fish, fishes, currents, the ocean and marine life if it was born in an aquarium prison and transferred to a kid's home for a fake relationship. A kid feed the fish (tried not to overfeed or fumble when changing the water), called it love yet it was more confinement, control, power and disposable utility.

Can we say the same of all pet-“owners”? No comment. More importantly, this realization made me stop blaming and pointing fingers at my father when I realized I was as responsible as him in this fish fetish circus. I had been as clueless as that fish. I could spend the rest of my life clueless and be put in a tumultuous toilet bowl to be flushed one day or I can start to become aware. Aware of anything beyond the transparent bowl and beyond the bonds of my limiting mind. So, I began to realize that all my upbringing, including my father, may have lied to me about awareness, on purpose or inadvertently, and maybe in their mind for my own good. My priest, my teacher, my friend, the TV could all be lying, omitting or distorting the truth with conviction. At age 5, I still believed in Santa Claus but hey, presents are nice! I later stopped believing in him, mainly because adults are not so convinced about the existence of Santa Claus and when kids get older, they stop pretending. I found out however that they are convinced about many other things that may not be true. Adults display remarkable acts of common beliefs in things that are rather subjective like the belief in spirits, God, money, morals, laws, education, economy, work, rituals, religion, relationship configuration, cultural ideals and taboos, family and so on. The more they act on these beliefs—and/or see others acting on them—, the more they are convinced of their validity.

I started to think how to expand my awareness. A bigger aquarium, even with different fishes was better but still a prison. A pond? I pondered. It has natural vegetation, the elements of the Earth without electricity and indoor comforts, but it is still *still*! A lake starts to have an ecosystem, can be enormous and can have currents, wind and motion. It is not going anywhere, however. How about a river? Yes, better! And a river runs and goes but it is not vast enough as it ends up in another river, a lake or the ocean. The ocean that’s it! I never want to be stuck in a fishbowl and will be aware in the ocean. It is riskier in the ocean, yet it is real life; full awareness. Yet more awareness tells us: wrong again...

After, the ocean, there is the Earth, in all its glory, including the layers of its atmosphere, ion storms, solar wind interacting with the Earth’s magnetic field to create amazing aurora borealis and australis, the glaciers, very old rocks and volcanoes that go all the way to the Earth’s core and more.

Then there is the solar system, the Milky Way galaxy, the local group and more until....

The vastness of the universe is awareness!

Wrong and wrong again. Always wrong. The universe includes so many things we are tempted to call it God. We cannot understand it. We can’t understand the galaxy, solar system, Earth, moon, ocean, river, lake, pond, aquarium or fish either. There is always smaller. Biology, chemistry, physics, quantum physics, etc. We can understand some of it, but we are forced to say we are still unaware. What then is awareness? The knowledge of the constant fishbowls we are in, and the desire and work to always discover them and see a different viewpoint. Awareness is seeing our limits to see clearly and imagining beyond them eagerly. Clarity recognizes the masks and lies and accepts (4As) them as such while seeking to unlearn and understand deeply.

Awareness = Active Skepticism (mostly of ourselves and our thoughts)

I first started to become aware at 5 years old and at 7 years old was my first big awakening moment! I realized in one instant that I was aware of so many things that others were not and that my life was going to be very different and difficult because of that. Awareness has its price and that is why the saying “ignorance is bliss” has its fair share of proponents. Why bother when we can be happy knowing less? I will show you nevertheless that awareness, although difficult to attain, maintain and come to grips with, may have even more fulfilling access to profound bliss and joy.

If you love sleep that is fine too. No one has to—or deserves to—be awake. One can find contentment (7Cs) and peace (8Ps) in many ways. If you think you can still be happier however, read on.

Auguries of Awareness

Being aware is not a destination but rather a state in which we can go in and out of and is in constant flux. Once you have truly awoken, it will be hard to ever be truly sleeping anymore yet it will be even harder to truly be aware, as you will constantly challenge your partial awareness!

Imagine that you are not a Flat Earther—are you?—and now believe the Earth is round or a sphere. You are also wrong, it is an oblate spheroid to be exact, meaning it flattens at the pole and widens at the equator. That is why, for instance, Africa is much bigger than it appears in any flat map or globe (sphere). If you knew that, bravo—email me and I'll treat you to your favorite beverage. In any case you are always only partially aware. So am I. So is everybody. Awareness is a never-ending quest that most do not undertake. And why would they? How does knowing the difference between a sphere or an oblate spheroid affect your life directly? Maybe it doesn't. Maybe it does in ways you are unaware of.

Imagine however you were born any year before the 16th century, chances are you would be a Flat Earther too. If you were educated and in Europe, say you were Christopher Columbus, you would have been a little less clueless—but a murderer. Historical evidence shows that educated people in the 15th century, including Columbus, were aware that the Earth was a sphere—not a spheroid. Columbus's main challenge in securing funding for his voyage was not the belief in a flat Earth but rather his miscalculation of the Earth's circumference and the distance to Asia. He believed the Earth was smaller than it is and underestimated the distance to the Indies, leading him to discover the Americas instead. Another form of unawareness. Before that, there are more than 200 000 years of Flat Earthers, more or less. Awareness is not humanity's strongest suite. We generally prefer stories and strong beliefs.

Centuries before, polymath Eratosthenes deduced the Earth's spherical shape in 220 BCE through shadow observations and measurements of the distance between the cities of Syene (modern Libya) and Alexandria (Egypt), where he was chief librarian. He was a scholar but not any old bookworm with a library card to die for. Before GPS and Google Maps, he became aware about this important fact of our common existence by pushing his awareness constantly. Did other people believe him at the time? Would you have if some geek Greek told you so? No.

Another Greek, mathematician and philosopher Pythagoras had tried three centuries before with little success. It would take a millennium before this awareness reached a critical mass. The idea of a spherical Earth did not spread widely beyond Greece initially due to a lack of communication and the limited reach of Greek influence at the time. Ancient Greece, while a hub of intellectual activity, had a relatively small geographic footprint, and its ideas often remained confined to its own cultural sphere (yes, sphere).

As for the repression of this theory, it was during the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire that the concept of a spherical Earth faced opposition. The Christian Church cited the Bible where some passages seemed to suggest that the Earth was flat—not to mention was created in six days. This led to a preference for a flat Earth model, which aligned more closely with certain biblical interpretations. "Spiritual" awareness may not be the one we are looking for in this case.

The next significant proponent of the spherical Earth theory was the Islamic scholar and other polymath, Al-Biruni (973–1048 CE), who provided detailed calculations and observations to support the idea. However, it was not until the Age of Discovery, particularly with the European-based voyages of Christopher Columbus and friends in the late 15th century, that the spherical Earth model gained widespread acceptance beyond the scholarly and scientific communities. The success of these voyages, which relied on the assumption of a spherical Earth, provided practical evidence that challenged the flat Earth model. Awareness takes time (centuries in this case), practice and perseverance (8Ps I told you).

Don't chant victory yet. The idea that the Earth is not the center of the universe, but rather that the Sun is at the center, is a concept known as heliocentrism. This theory was proposed by the Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus in the 16th century. Copernicus' work, "*De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*" ("On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres"), published in 1543, laid out his heliocentric model, which placed the Sun at the center of the solar system with the planets, including Earth, orbiting around it. However, the heliocentric model faced significant opposition from—guess who?—the Catholic Church and other religious institutions, as it contradicted the geocentric model, which was widely accepted at the time and was in line with interpretations of biblical texts.

It was not until the 17th century that heliocentrism gained significant support and acceptance in the scientific community. The work of astronomers like Galileo Galilei, who observed the moons of Jupiter and supported Copernicus' theory, and Johannes Kepler, who formulated his laws of planetary motion, played crucial roles in this shift.

Galileo's use of the telescope to make astronomical observations and his subsequent publication of "*Sidereus Nuncius*" ("Starry Messenger") in 1610 provided strong evidence in favor of heliocentrism. He faced severe persecution by the Catholic Church, which placed his works on the Index of Prohibited Books and forced him to recant his views. Galileo's contributions were pivotal in the acceptance of heliocentrism, but can you start to imagine how many more people with above-average awareness were censored or killed for this or other views throughout history? As mentioned, awareness can come with a price. It is however worth its sometimes-steep controversy and condemnation. Awareness is real freedom, including freedom from fear, where death, censorship or other is no longer enough to force people to sleep or be silent. Awakening often requires courage (7Cs).

Galileo died aware but not the public. The wide acceptance of heliocentrism came much later, with the gradual spread of scientific knowledge and education. It took until 19th century for the heliocentric model to become the dominant paradigm. Of course this model is partial and incorrect in its complete comprehension—continuous hypothesis (not conviction) is the scientific method (not proclaimed belief in “science”)—yet provides better bases to build further awareness.

We know now for example that the solar system works mainly because of one of the four fundamental forces of the Universe: gravity. By all accounts, it is an invisible.

The other three fundamental forces are also all invisible: electromagnetic—which everyone can have an educated guess about and try to grasp superficially— and nuclear forces (strong and weak). Only physicists and nerds know about these nuclear forces, yet they affect everything in the universe including every cell of your body and brain, all the time. The word “nuclear” is associated with bombs and dangerous energy in general culture, yet awareness allows us to be in awe (4As) of its subtle constant reassuring beauty and immense contribution to the fabric of our very reality. The strong and weak nuclear forces, gravity and electromagnetism affect almost every particle in the universe.

The world works with some many invisible systems, including these in your body and brain, you are completely unaware of. Your body also has genes, and your brains has a nervous system. These systems make you functional and fight for your survival yet often also make you unaware. Awareness starts not when you recognize the intricate laws of physics, but when you realize the pervasive personal limitations your own mind has because of your upbringing, attachment to your culture, family, friends, work and world views. You can love your family and friends—and I strongly encourage you to! You do not have to accept that either them or you are aware, however. Accept (4As) your unawareness to start walking the path of awareness (4As).

Definition of Awareness

Above we saw two ways to increase awareness: educating yourself on new topics (broadening) or explore a topic more thoroughly and comprehensively (deepening). Still, it is not always knowledge, abstractions or details that bring awareness. They can also—and often do—bring further unawareness. Accumulation of knowledge is often without proper information, insight, criticism, detachment, flexibility, openness and cohesive comprehension. It is not only to criticize others or information sources, but mainly to be hypercritical about our own thinking! We will see that you and everyone is (severely) biased and much less rational than each assumes. More knowledge does not bring more awareness automatically.

Before we define awareness together, let us look at a few common definitions:

1. Ability to see oneself clearly and objectively through deep reflection and introspection, including one's thoughts, feelings, behaviors, bodily and sensory perceptions
2. Perception or knowledge of something (often synonymous with consciousness)
3. Being conscious, alert, and informed about a subject without necessarily applying understanding
4. Noticing stimuli in the environment, along with one's perceptions and thinking processes deep understanding
5. Social awareness is the comprehension of social contexts and non-verbal cues during interactions
6. Public self-awareness is understanding how others perceive you and adjusting behavior accordingly
7. Peripheral awareness refers to processing sensory information at the edge of attention, like distant sounds while focused on a task
8. Awareness can also mean mindfulness, staying present in the moment without distraction

We can notice that two definitions specify that awareness is “deep” as opposed to shallow.

To increase awareness, you can practice mindfulness and meditation, reflect on personal experiences, seek feedback from others, engage in journaling, or participate in self-development activities like workshops, coaching or therapy.

We can thus more broadly define and concisely categorize awareness as:

1. Self-awareness (cognitive, sensory and emotional awareness—metacognition)
2. Social awareness
3. Selfless awareness (universal and scoping)

Awareness can best be defined as active attention to unobvious, usually unassuming and unaware invisible forces, patterns and elements at play in your body, your mind, that of others and in the universe. The more you are aware; the more things will be connected (7Cs). The more you are curious (7Cs); the more invisible may become visible. The more you connect; the joining patterns will lead you to oneness. The more you are honest; the less you will assume you know and the more you will be aware of the untruths of the stories you tell yourself. The less judgement you will have for yourself, others or the circumstances; the more you can see situations in a compassionate (7Cs) light. The more you are present (8Ps); the better you can notice the world, including yourself. We will see more about “active attention” in my next book in the happiness series *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention!* and about noticing with positivity (8Ps) in chapter 4.

Awareness is a path to happiness and is not always an easy one. It requires courage (7Cs), patience (8Ps) and perseverance (8Ps).

Increasing Awareness

Much suffering, much unhappiness arises when you take each thought that comes into your head for the truth. Situations don't make you unhappy. They may cause you physical pain, but they don't make you unhappy. Your thoughts make you unhappy.

-Eckhart Tolle

Situations, ideas or words do not make you unhappy, you do! This is simply the source of all suffering stated long ago by Buddha in the East and echoed in the West by Stoic philosophers.

Setting clear goals, observing your surroundings attentively, openness, flexibility and being constantly receptive rather than reactive can enhance overall awareness. Observing your inner world seems to be even more important and crucial. You will always deceive yourself more than you deceive others. To increase your awareness, admit that you are the greatest liar to yourself, regardless of if you see the deceptions now, later or never. Tolle also cleverly explains that “suffering is necessary until you realize it is unnecessary”. People mistakenly believe that you need to experience suffering to savour the fulness of happiness and joy. That is utter and complete crap! Capacity to experience negative emotions does not mean we have to exert or employ that like our capacity to lie, cheat and kill does not mean we have to exhibit these behaviors. Being aware of your potential addiction, anger, jealousy, vengeful thoughts and murderous tendencies allows the possibility to train your brain to see these mental or emotional states and to prevent suffering for yourself and others.

The other crucial universal aspect to be aware of, after the source of suffering—you—, is the short-lived or ephemeral nature of all things and forms. We are just a blink of an eye in cosmic terms. Our whole species' recent birth and eventual demise—with or without climate change and artificial intelligence—is so insignificant and yet we overestimate the importance of humanness and try to link it with stories of soul, eternity and divinity. If we can be aware of the relative overhype of the whole of humanity, think of the even lesser consequence of “you”, “your” desires, “your” family or “your” country or artificial affiliation. Even Albert Einstein, Adolf Hitler, Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, and all the prominent people combined—social media influencers, modern monarchs, multibillionaires and celebrities—will not be of great importance in a few more thousand years. Recorded human history is 5000 years. If you include prehistoric time, we are at perhaps 300 000 years of human folly. Scientists estimate that at least 99.9% of all species of plants and animals that ever lived are now extinct since the appearance of biological life on Earth about 3 900 000 000 years ago. And we have temporarily risen to the top of the lot with our big brains, big pharma and big tech but there are currently over 8 million estimated number of animal and plant species on Earth (including 5.5 million insect species)¹.

We may continue to pretend we are different and special, but Earth and the universe do not really care about the pretentious billions of us who write books and build rockets. That does not make us any more important or immortal.

Imagine how short our individual lives are. One day we are born, one day we die. This awareness is crucial as well as the impermanence of everything else, from health, wealth, material and mental well-being. Most relationships end or at least change, nothing stays the same for long and we all die. Knowing

¹ Díaz, S., Settele, J., Brondízio, E. et al. (2019). Summary for policymakers of the global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. ISPPBES.

this may make us want to cling on to more things reactively but ultimately frees us from holding on to this illusion and destructive delusion. The Stoics practiced this unattachment daily. I mentally practice losing my loved ones (as well as strangers I am fond of) regularly while acting in a way to appreciate (4As) them. Being aware (4As) of—and accepting (4As)—the precarity of my relationships in a non-attached attempt to maximize my enjoyment of the preciousness of their presence (8Ps) in my life has served me and allowed me not to hold regrets. I ask myself often: “is this the way I would act or words I would use if this were the last time I would see or speak to this person?” I use patience (8Ps) and strive to augment my connection (7Cs) and impact by being of service them.

When a loss occurs—distance, death, divorce, breakup, bankrupt, status—, awareness allows us to see that this perceived loss is only because we had unconsciously identified with or attached ourselves to that object: person, possession, psychological or physical state, social, economical or cultural ideal. We may feel disoriented by the grief mechanism which is clinging on to that identity and illusion of possession. Awareness makes us realize we do not own anything, or anyone. We do not deserve anything at all and should not feel offended if things do not go “our way”. We can still act with courage (7Cs), purpose (8Ps) and perseverance (8Ps) in the face of adversity. Awareness, especially in grief, may require radical—rather than gradual or inconsistent—acceptance as we will see in the next chapter. Awareness of the utter delusion and disconnect of our expectations of safety and sameness with the ever-present experience of change may elevate our ability to be and remain increasingly conscious of the overarching forces of existence. Not exactly chaos, as chaotic systems or quantum uncertainty have been largely disproven, but most certainly change. Even what may appear the same is constantly changing in some aspect. Be aware of that.

I explained in my novel *Two Heads Are Better Than None* that you are not the same as you were two years ago or two seconds ago. You are temporary and it is tempting but false to think of yourself as a coherent whole or temporally consistent. That is just a (changing) story. Don’t trust your malleable memories. You are only intrinsically part of a coherent whole when you consider all that is, was and ever will be. Not an easy thing to imagine or understand but just remember that you can be aware of your biases and limitations without automatically inventing something that makes no sense to justify your lack of understanding. This is where most perceived awakening processes fail. People feel they are opening new possibilities only to be stuck in same or similar clear patterns of self or collective deceit or delusions. Arrested development. Arrested awakening. Arrested awareness. Often regression and renewed rigidity instead of faster and further unlearning towards lucidity.

Learn to die daily and learn to let all your false identities and ideologies also die daily. Let go of all the masks you were forced to wear, ideas you were tricked into believing—but that you claim as yours and deem either rationally or intuitively true—and ego identities you do not even know inhabit you like bacteria, viruses, parasites or nefarious ghosts.

Aware

Awareness arrives to the wise but often not as a prize but a burden. Ignorance may permit protection from discomfort. Ignorance is—temporary—bliss. But life is temporary, as it is. Why bother be aware when we can avoid and play ostrich? Because aware is better in the long run if you can channel what to do with this awareness. Discomfort is part of the game. Learn to sit in discomfort and to think outside the box to be aware. Think outside of the outside of the box. Like the fish bowl, there is likely another bigger prison that awaits.

Unmask the mind-made stories you created or repeated like a parrot. See clearly how yourself and others are often only mere marionettes. The main puppeteer is of course the ego—individual, collective or even “divine”—and it seeks to:

1. Have rigid mental position: be “right” (meaning someone is “wrong”—or “left”)
2. Create conflict with something or someone: seek and maintain separation between “me” or “us” and “other” or “them”—instead of seeing sameness and oneness.

Being aware of all the various forms of your ego identifications can take quite some time and empathy is even a form of expanded ego as we saw in *Beyond Happy*. Your ego is hijacking your emotions and thoughts, and you should become aware of all these forms and convincing stories to be aware as can be. Awareness brings more choices, thus freedom.

Mindfulness and awareness are the best keys I found for possible persistent positivity (8Ps), presence (8Ps) and contentment (7Cs). We established the basis and benefits of constant and all-encompassing gratitude in *Beyond Happy* and will encounter the pleasures of appreciation in chapter 3. Mindfulness and awareness can act synergistically as mindful presence can engender wonder, and awe—see chapter 4—can lead to increased awareness and presence as well with its mind-shifting and focusing characteristics. Tolle speaks of presence as being in the moment, the now, as opposed to the past or the future. There is also a spatial component which can be called the here. Yes, happiness is right here and now. Now, we must become aware of it. As we play (8Ps) between different levels or layers (onion!) of awareness and oneness-realization, I find a very useful tool of mindfulness to be zooming in and out.

Mindful Zooming

Think of the infinitely small like the biology of synapses between your neuronal cells, and even smaller to the receptors and channels on the cell membranes, the chemistry of the building blocks of the universe, hydrogen atoms and the nitrogen and oxygen gases that fill Earth’s precarious atmosphere. Go deeper, beyond the atom, we have muons, neutrinos & electrons, energy light-photons with no real mass. Protons and neutrons, further divide into elementary particles called quarks. A positron is the antimatter counterpart of the electron. Cosmic rays permeate the universe with background radiation since the Big Bang. Quantum physics push the limit of our understanding and have entanglements across vast distance at the reverse of small.

Think of the infinitely big, bigger than your wildest dream, bigger than your comprehension. Imagine you have traveled the world, the navigable, fly-aroundable Earth, maybe you traversed the Earth’s 40,000 km diameter in a day (two long flights), a year or two (Americans average about 20,000 km driving a year), a decade. What next? The distance from the Earth to Moon is 363,300 km or 1.2 light-second. The moon can be seen most nights reflecting the sun’s light but is so far away. In 1969, it took four days, six hours, and 45 minutes for three courageous astronauts to reach the Moon, instead of the one second it takes the light to reach us. The Saturn V spacecraft traveled at a maximum speed of about 39,000 kilometers per hour shortly after launch and average speed of 3,537 km/h for the entire journey of the Apollo 11 mission.

A few months before that, the famous “Earthrise” was photographed by astronaut William Anders on December 24, 1968, taken from lunar orbit. It shows the Earth rising in the horizon with the moon as a foreground. It is one of the most important photos ever taken because it starts to show that all our human-fabricated self-importance may not be as warranted as we taught compared to the immensity of space. Before then, even if our Earth-centric view had been replaced by a Sun-centered view of our solar system as seen at the beginning of the chapter or our universe could include an expanding property like

George Lemaire remarked in 1931 and was further confirmed in 1964 with the discovery of cosmic background radiation, we had never emotionally experienced it quite like before that picture. We were no longer the center of the world. The ego of the entire Earth had been shattered with this picture which gave the first of many similar perspective shifts to those who were keen to notice. I know that the Earth itself has not ego. It is rather us humans who attach egos and importance to everything. It is not only the universe that is expanding, but also our ego!

On September 5, 1977, almost 9 years after eye-opening Earthwise, NASA launched *Voyager 1* to explore the far reaches of our solar system and beyond. Spreading our ego further, but also seeking more knowledge and connection (7Cs)—yes, with aliens—with curiosity (7Cs). Over two decades later into its voyage, the space probe took another important photo on February 14, 1990, from a record distance of about 6 billion kilometers (or 40.5 AU), as part of that day's Family Portrait series of images of the Solar System. In the photograph, later named Pale Blue Dot, Earth's apparent size is less than a pixel; the planet appears as a tiny dot against the vastness of space. Pale Blue Dot clearly shows our very little significance even in our small solar system and astronomer and author Carl Sagan wrote about this epiphany a fitting eulogy of our shared ego:

"From this distant vantage point, the Earth might not seem of any particular interest. But for us, it's different. Consider again that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there—on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam."

There are a few videos of "The Pale Blue Dot" circulating and my friend watches a specific one regularly to remind himself of the relative insignificance of his problems. This photography and accompanying videos and reflections help foster humility rather quickly.

We can go much further in space. Although a 22+ year space voyage and 6 billion kilometers is probably already at the limit of our comprehension, it is still infinitely small compared to our solar system, our galaxy, our galaxy cluster, or the observable universe. *Voyager 1* left the Earth before I was born or even conceived and is currently exploring a transitional zone between our solar system (heliosphere) and interstellar space, constellation of Ophiuchus, at almost 25 billion kilometres (168 AU) away in 2025, 35 years after the Pale Blue Dot stellar photography. However, that distance is not even a light-day. No spacecraft has gone farther the *Voyager 1* yet it is still extremely far from the next closest solar system, Alpha Centauri. Proxima Centauri is the closest star (of at least three) in that system, at 4.25 light-years from Earth or about 269,000 AU. In 55 years, we haven't traveled a light-day, only 22 light-hours, and it would take us close to 100,000 years—a third of humanity's existence since hunter gathers in the Ethiopian valleys—at this pace to reach the nearest star. There are about half a trillion stars in our average galaxy, the Milky Way. Some galaxies have up to 100 trillion stars! Our observable Universe, which has a diameter of 93 billion light-years, seems to contain at least two trillion galaxies². Remember that *homo sapiens*, our biologically distinct species, is dated at approximately 0.3-million-year-old, and all our written history is about 5000 years old. Now, would you please let go of your ego? Access awareness instead.

² Nine Planets. *How Many Galaxies are there in the Universe?* 2020
<https://nineplanets.org/questions/how-many-galaxies-are-there-in-the-universe/>

Awareness is not only intellectual but is also emotional like the fateful photos of Earthrise and Pale Blue Dot, and includes the consciousness and experience beyond thoughts, feelings and emotions. Mindful zooming is a tool to train our mind to increase our awareness until it becomes visceral, easily accessible and allows us to challenge the thoughts, feelings and emotions that tricks us many times a day. In fact, we should think of our normal state as being unaware. Our neurology and biology block us from awareness constantly. Much more than we may intuitively think—exactly because intuition is not awareness, simply a short-cut for our brain to save mental energy. Imagine seeing a drooling 3-month-old baby who can barely sit straight; that is likely more than the level of almost everyone’s awareness when compared to the potential awareness a human could reach. Some children are more aware than most adults; I have seen some! Knowledge or experience do not add up to awareness. Yet the amazing news is that we can all learn, exercise and practice to increase our awareness significantly. Some may have more capacity to be aware (may it be acquired, innate or a mix) but almost all can increase whatever awareness level they currently have and even change the expression of the trait to some degree. It is like a muscle or a language, it must be trained, used and practice. Or else, you may become less aware. I have seen and even experienced that too!

After zooming in and out of space, we can do the same with time. Carl Sagan’s television series *Cosmos*, and its various visually and scientifically inspiring incarnations, uses the *Cosmic Calendar* as a method to visualize the chronology of the universe, scaling its currently understood age of 13.8 billion years to a single year. At this scale, there are 26,250 years per cosmic minute, and 1.6 million years per cosmic hour. In this calendar of existence, the whole human existence started around 11:50pm, on December 31, and our recorded history about 10 seconds before midnight on the last day of the year. We are accustomed to see and think about the small immediate stuff. Important to us and our ego, but insignificant in all practicality. Even when we try to think “big picture”, it is still with our human folly and exaggerated importance—still “small picture”. For instance, environmentally conscious or cause-activists and alarmists people cast blame on older generations and current policies for global warming green-house effect gases that likely elevate the Earth’s temperature. This concern is slightly bigger picture than the polluting populace of past and present. However, as comedian George Carlin³ points out eloquently: humans are arrogant and self-important. He claims with amazing humour that humans trying to save other animal or plant species is simply ego-centred humans trying to control our environment, while over 99% of species have gone extinct, regardless of human interference. We can also remember that humans had a geocentric view of the universe (Earth as the center) before a better heliocentric view (Sun as the center) which works for the solar system but not at all for the universe! We put our egos and limited vantage points everywhere. Carlin explains that the popular and politically motivated idea of “saving the planet” is ego on steroids and that 200 years of industrial pollutions is nothing versus the 4 billion plus of planet stable survival, through thousands of cosmic impacts, drastic temperature changes, volcanic activity, and the likes—over 99% without us. Even the cataclysmic impact of a protoplanet roughly the size of Mars (about half Earth’s diameter) did not destroy the planet which we were born and breathe on; it created our moon instead. Or so says the current moon origin story (like a superhero), but—as we have seen—stories change with time and current scientists are challenging this hypothesis to potentially increase our awareness⁴. Whichever story becomes the strongest and supported doesn’t change the

³ Carlin, George. *Jammin’ in New York*. 1992

⁴ Meier, Thomas & Reinhardt, Christian & Timpe, Miles & Stadel, Joachim & Moore, Ben. (2024). A Systematic Survey of Moon-forming Giant Impacts. II. Rotating Bodies. *The Astrophysical Journal*. 978. 10.3847/1538-4357/ad9248.

lucidity of Carlin's comedy. He simply states the obvious that we may be stupid enough to kill ourselves and maybe a few other species, but that the planet and life itself will undoubtedly be fine with or without us.

When I zoom in and out, I often start with my surroundings and my senses. Physical sensations like the wind on my skin, sights, sounds, and many internal sensations. I actively think of the fact that smaller parts of my body are part of the whole (genes, proteins, cells that work together) and that my body is also part of the bigger picture (or "play"; the human comedy, the solar tragedy, the universe's melodrama and universal farce or fascinating fancy). I try to imagine all it took for me to be right here and right now. All it took others to build: the streets and buildings where there was once nature; the food that someone else grew, cultivated, farmed, bred, killed for me, packed, stored, shipped, displayed and stored (some times even refrigerated), up to my refrigerator, home and plate (all invented, conceived and built by others); the invention of writing, printing and electronic books to write and read instead of listening to stories from people in a few kilometer radius; the invention of the internet instead of the public library or the Library of Alexandria; the clothes I wear that were probably made in a far away land; the barber who cut my hair a few weeks ago; the lady who picked up my garbage, recycling or compost bin last week; the various inventors of airplane technology to let me travel the world more than Marco Polo and Magellan combined! This is a formidable form of mindfulness and awareness than can lead to awe, appreciation, gratitude, and perhaps most importantly to perspective and humility.

The Butterfly Effect is a theory that a butterfly flapping its wings in one part of the world can cause devastating consequences in another part. It was advanced by theoretical meteorologist, Edward Norton Lorenz, and popularized by James Gleick's best-selling book *Chaos: Making a New Science* in 1987. Lorenz saw that there were systems that can exhibit unpredictable behavior or chaotic systems, and they were abundant in nature. This perceived chaos is the opposite of order, yet the ultimate order (oneness) would include or disregard chaos. These systems are only chaotic in as much as we (mere limited humans) do not understand them. Beyond chaos, we can see or at least imagine order and connection in an uninterrupted "perfect" and self-contained universe. What some would call singleness. Chaos only explains why systems that seem simple in classical physics diverge and give random outcomes. Quantum systems aren't chaotic. Some waves and interferences make the system recur periodically, and Dr. Bernardo Huberman rebutted the very idea of chaos⁵. Again, the more we are aware of our unawareness, the more we can push our awareness towards the obvious oneness and interconnectivity of all.

Zoom in and out often enough and enough times allow us to be feel one with the mechanism of existence, even if we do not understand their extent and intricacies perfectly. I had a long debate with a girlfriend about perfection. We often hear the phrase "nobody's perfect" and we are asked to rate our scale of perfectionism from sloppy to obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). My then girlfriend and I came up with the concept of imperfect perfection. What may seem imperfect based on biased views of perfection, when zoomed out enough can always seem perfect. We touch on this at the end of *Beyond Happy* to be able to see awe and perfection in each second and day.

Spiritually or religiously, I would say that if God exists and he has a special connection with humans (let's just imagine this silly story many believe feverishly for a minute), God would have created an arguably imperfect world as judged by the humans he has a special connection with or created as His image. Yet if you believe in God, you may guess that God the creator had created a perfect world we do

⁵ Dr. Bernardo Huberman: How to Use Curiosity & Focus to Create a Joyful & Meaningful Life | Huberman Lab. 2024

not see as perfect because we are not God. In other words, “God” is perfect, and we are too but cannot see the perfection, lacking God’s infinite knowledge and wisdom.

If we forget about a possible God or conscious Universe, we can simply imagine the universe as being a machine that plays this video game called existence. We know our hearts are amazing machines that pump blood through our veins for some times over 100 years, if nothing else fails, they eventually fail. We have a lifespan, we get sick, and we die. We know every computer ever built also has a lifespan. The one on Voyager 1 has lasted over 55 years but the software or hardware will eventually crash too. Mars rover “Opportunity” exceeded its 90-day mission life expectancy and explored mars for over 14 years yet still ceased functioning. You will likely not live over 150 years. The oldest cave paintings found in Sulawesi, Indonesia are dated about 40 000 years. They will be preserved for how long? Longer than you and me, but not that long. Everything perishes and that can be scary to imagine. Fear of death, uncertainty, lack or potential purpose (8Ps) and meaning are some of the primal human fears as we will see in *Beyond Spirituality* and also some main causes, we many instinctively believe in a soothing higher power or God. We know for instance that thoughts of death⁶, loneliness, conflict or political uncertainty increases religiosity and that belief in a higher power can reduce the grief associated with death of a loved one⁷. Insecure individuals are at greater odds to benefit from increasing the importance of their beliefs to decrease their emotional reaction to the loss of a loved one. Belief in a higher order is soothing.

There are other and perhaps better ways to decrease grief, increase contentment (7Cs), acceptance (4As) and appreciation (4As) as we will see in the next two chapters. Once you go beyond these fears with courage (7Cs), I find these realizations of our small significance reassuring instead of frightening. It makes our daily worries less important and gives more space for humor, play (8Ps) and presence (8Ps). If reading this is not enough to help your innate fear of death, some researchers and clinicians propose psilocybin—a potent psychedelic that reduces your ego chemically—as a potential way to alleviate your existential anxiety⁸. Religion is famously known as the “opium of the people”, and I suggest you may need neither (drug or God) if you take the time to accept your small role and give yourself purpose as a superpower you control—while simultaneously admitting your profound lack of control.

Less Ego = Less Fear of Death

Roughly 5 billion years from now, the Sun will exhaust the hydrogen fuel in its core and start burning helium, forcing its transition into a red giant star and will slowly but surely engulf Mercury, Venus... and eventually Earth around 7.6 billion years from now⁹ or potentially survive but still be destroyed by tidal forces of the dying or dead star (not Death Star) and Jupiter¹⁰. Our Sun will also “die” itself when it runs out of helium. When it will have exhausted all its nuclear fuel and so have no residual nuclear energy sources, it will become a white dwarf, and stay that way potentially for trillions of years. We can say from a bigger picture viewpoint that our Sun may have not “died” but rather transformed and became a butterfly. Stellar Butterfly Effect?

⁶ Tracy, Jessica & Hart, Joshua & Martens, Jason. (2011). Death and Science: The Existential Underpinnings of Belief in Intelligent Design and Discomfort with Evolution. PLoS one. 6. e17349. 10.1371/journal.pone.0017349.

⁷ Brown, Stephanie & Nesse, Randolph & House, James. (2004). Religion and Emotional Compensation: Results from a Prospective Study of Widowhood. Personality & social psychology bulletin. 30. 1165-74. 10.1177/0146167204263752.

⁸ Kim, Arum & Halton, Barley & Shah, Akash & Seecof, Olivia & Ross, Stephen. (2024). Psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy for existential distress: practical considerations for therapeutic application-a review. Annals of palliative medicine. 13. 10.21037/apm-24-35.

⁹ Schroder, Klaus-Peter; Smith, Robert C. Smith. *Distant future of the Sun and Earth revisited*. (January 2008)

¹⁰ Veras, D. et al. *Orbital relaxation and excitation of planets tidally interacting with white dwarfs*. (April 2019)

(Change = Transformation) + Awareness = Change of Perspective

In that way our own births and deaths can also be viewed as transformations. Irreversible (in linear terms) and perhaps incomprehensible to some extent. Zooming in we can imagine particles assembling into cells and cell reproduction and then disassembling during decomposition of the body. This may sound too scientific and boring, so imagine simply how your parents met and what most have gone through their brains (emotions) and circumstances of the world in motion for their (external) encounter and for the attraction to be strong enough to engage in sex (yes, imagining your parents having sex is a big taboo, I know), perhaps several times, until voila, amazing and annoying you is born. Now imagine the same for both sets of grandparents, then for four great grandparent couples and eight great great grandparents' copulation. Computation of changing population leading to you. The factors involved in your creation can date back further than the Cretaceous Period some 150 million years ago. If you really think about how many butterflies had to flap their wings for your life to take flight as beautiful, precious, perilous, fragile, and fatal as it may be. It is amazing to be you and part of the world. Your existence is in fact "perfection". Your eventual death too. The Universe is the only machine we know that keeps the game playing perfectly, without fail for trillions of years. Never did it break, its pieces are just in an incredible motion behind the scenes, and we are spectators of a very small part of the entire play and saga. Enjoy the adventure! That is both awareness and awesomeness.

Mindfulness Zooming = Oneness = Perfection = Perspective + Humility = Gratitude

Mindfulness Zooming = Attention + Awareness + Appreciation + Awe (4As)

Zooming is thus a tool for awareness as well as all the 4 Aces. It takes considerable mental energy as opposed to simple intuition about the world and our surroundings, but its bounty is so rewarding, as well as the process if you possess and apply curiosity (7Cs). It does not need to be so "scientific", you can add your own flavor with creativity (7Cs) and imagination, just remember not to become attached to any belief, dogma or rigid thinking. See thoughts as they are, just thoughts, to remain aware in your reverie.

Mindful X

Coming back to Earth and the here and now, we can see how mindfulness is not just an esoteric meditation you do with your legs in the lotus position with your eyes closed, rejecting reality. Being mindful is being present (8Ps) in the moment, focusing your attention, not lost in your mind's machinations. We can incorporate mindfulness in almost anything: mindful walking, mindful sex, mindful eating, mindful cooking, mindful working, mindful playing (8Ps), mindful music-playing, mindful TV watching, mindful reading, mindful speaking, mindful breathing, mindful cleaning, mindful kissing, mindful touching, mindful active listening, mindful meeting, mindful social media consumption—yes that is possible!—.... mindful smoking even! You can practice mindful smoking to be conscious of the positive perceived aspects of the habit as well as the negative ones in a more objective way before quitting. In other words, Mindful X.

Mindful may mean you are both more intentional in your action and aware. It allows for introspection in inaction as well as action. The only states where mindfulness may have a limit are death or dream. There is no mind in death and the mind is more unconscious than usual during sleep and dream. Even delusions, mental disease, disorder, and psychotic hallucinations which do not represent reality can have a mindful component to it. If we are mindful of our delusions, we may be better equipped to recognize them in the future. My psychiatrist thought me to recognize the signs of increased paranoia for instance. I noticed that in my two psychotic episodes, I would think people touching (not picking) their noses (a normal human activity few notice consciously), were communicating through nonverbal signs

and potentially plotting against me. Now I can recognize this if it were to ever happen again and I can also recognize other thought patterns. You do not need to have a psychotic episode to recognize your thought patterns, potentially useful, neutral or harmful. Be mindful of your reality, your thoughts, your emotions, words and actions, always or as much as possible. We have delusions every day, with or without full blown psychosis. Look even deeper and try to understand your motivations, your real reasons behind your thoughts and emotions. You will find that you too are often delusional, only in a different less obvious red flag, red pill way. The real delusional people are the ones who think they are not!

“Crazy is a numbers game. Like if enough people do it—then it’s not crazy anymore.”¹¹ Remember my warnings about group thinking in *Beyond Happy* and *Beyond Spirituality*? Be mindful of your mind and how it is influenced by others in so many intricate ways. We have so many cognitive biases and emotional hijacks, including intense desires, aversions and fears.

To recap, mindfulness should be active and as often as possible, not relegated to a certain part of the day, week, or area of the body or of your life. Mindfulness is like a muscle and can be developed. Not only should you do it more often, but you should also do it better, differently, and deeper. There is no limit to mindfulness.... Except your mind maybe. Expand your mind, expand your synaptic connections. Lead the way to discovery with attention (see *Don’t Be Authentic, Pay Attention!*) and curiosity (7Cs). Mindfulness begets awareness.

Mindfulness Mastery = Every Waking Moment

I mentioned in the previous section that awareness can be trained and is clearly affected by genes and environment. Besides having sex with people who are “aware” to affect genes—mindful sex is amazing and I suggest Lori Brotto’s book on the subject—, we can start to tailor our environment by having people with authentic higher level of awareness around us, seeking out or creating (7Cs) communities, and inspiring our peers, parents and children to raise their awareness—or at least interest and motivation in raising it. Again, awareness is not about a specific topic or knowledge but about existence itself which is the main element of wisdom, contentment (7Cs), peace (8Ps) and happiness in our awakening journey. Do not be surprised if your peers, parents, children, coworkers, or others find you crazy, weird, arrogant or obnoxious. Speak and think with compassion (7Cs) and nonjudgement and let them arrive to their own conclusions one day if they have the capacity and courage (7Cs). Before annoying others, concentrate on your own awareness with perseverance (8Ps) and practice. Here are more techniques to try.

Mindful (Multifold) Scan

Mindful body scan is a technique to focus our attention on different body parts as we may meditate, supposedly quietly and close to physical stillness. It is a practice I have tried and enjoyed thoroughly, although as with all meditation, the constant challenging of random thoughts rushing in to take their place is always a consideration to contend. The idea of the scan is to give depth, focus and attention, and to cherish your body with care, gratitude, and good intentions. Another similar exercise is the “savour the sole of your feet” one where you are conscious of all the weight and hard work your feet do for you daily and focus on the sensation of your feet with the ground and the balance of your body as you walk, preferably barefoot.

I want our mindfulness to go further and be able to scan anything beyond our body as well. Yes, our body relays real-time, real-world sensations to various degree through our senses, but our mind is capable of so much more through its imagination, creativity, curiosity, and wonder. Wonder is wandering

¹¹ McKenna, Jed. *Spiritually Incorrect Enlightenment*. Page 57. 2010

beyond ourselves to discover and delight in. It is investigating and incorporating the immeasurable complexity at every opportunity. It is seeing infinity in every moment, people, place, probability, purpose, forces, chain of events, situation, and possible perspectives, beyond simple empathy or sophisticated anthropology. After you see, think and feel this potent elixir of potential, you accept that the reality before you is the correct current view and all-encompassing in its perfection and inherent truth, further than wisdom and whimsical providence. Expand until there is nothing further. No other, no need. No explanation needed, just contentment (7Cs). No elsewhere, no different time or reality. Here and now with complete acceptance (4As) and awareness emanating from elation and elevation.

Mindful Meditation = Ego

Mindful Expansion = Egoless

Nothing further to find, does not mean finality. It is always about the journey, but the journey can take a different form as we are not static and can (like a butterfly) be transformed. Be curious always. Know that satiation is not from the quantity but the quality of your inquiry. You will be satiated and “full” for the rest of your journey not when you answer all the questions, but when questions will one by one become irrelevant. Deconstruct, declutter, debunk your delusions.

Mindful Awareness

What is awareness? Aware of all the layers of illusions, delusions, as well as serene simplicity. Contentment comes from full awareness. There is nothing more to seek, desire, want, wish, hope—nor fear or turn away from—not even the continuation of “this moment” we know must change and stop like all others.

Contentment = Full Awareness = Truth > Fear

In my first novel, *Paradise on Earth?*, the protagonist Thomas experiences an “unprovoked bliss” in the second chapter, which comes at him like a marvelous wave and eventually leaves him as suddenly and unexpectedly as it arrived. I now realized that most people’s quest to happiness through “spirituality”, religion, philosophy, values, work, success, betterment or search of valuable wisdom and enlightenment is mainly a hedonistic egoistic version of happiness, meaning it is transient and not long-lasting. All the people I met or read about with “spiritual” or “religious” experiences of different kinds can be defined as having one or a few positively transforming intense experiences, that came and went, followed by a reinforcing thought pattern (I warned you about delusional thoughts) to perpetuate this pseudo-ascension needing constant justification, devotion, and attention. Happiness cannot be a perpetual blissful state. Our body and our brain are not equipped, do not have the neurendocrine circuitry to keep us “high on life” 24/7. The best we can probably do is diminish the highs and lows, or as I always say, shorten the lows and keep the healthy highs.

Bliss = Temporary

Courage (7Cs) + Trust > Fear

Contentment (7Cs) = Peace (Ps) + Awareness (As)

With this awareness, we can dig and dig with less fear, knowing we can rarely be much unhappier and more fearful than we are now. Be curious and courageous beyond fears. Trust the process without trusting your thoughts and ideas too much. We can possibly be more peaceful, less agitated, and less frequently jolted from life’s every surprising turn, which should not be that surprising if you sit down and think about it. No surprise is trust. We saw in *Beyond Happy* that is good practice to “say what you do and do as you say” to build trust with people. To build trust with the universe, just remark and notice that the universe always does as it says, it is only you who are surprised because you are not listening!

This will bring us to acceptance in the next chapter. Accept what is and be less surprised of the universe not doing what you expect, want, wish or desire.

Mindfulness, Unfairness and the Brain

Mindfulness may still seem like blah, blah or bull's excrement, but voila, this section will hit you with some brain science in your mid-section. No C-section, I still love natural birth and mid-wives as well as some of the medical professionals. They are all mostly useful. Here are also some useful facts.

Mindfulness practice is found to decrease the activation of anterior insula, which is linked to disgust, mistrust and unfairness. Less unfairness, just by being mindful, that's cool.

Mindfulness = More Trust (Less Mistrust)

Mindfulness = More Beauty and Awe (Less Disgust)

Mindfulness is also linked to the activation of the prefrontal cortex (PFC) and helps develop intuition and insight, reducing risky decisions¹². It does increase trust while reducing risk, amazing duo of neurological effects!

Mindfulness = Reduce Risk + Increase Intuition and Insight

The feeling of unfairness can seem good in terms of empathy, ethics and social justice, however the "not fair" feelings can be seen as impersonal firings of the anterior insula in your brain. The reality is life is not fair and never will be. Again, we can better accept and take action instead of fretting, reacting, resisting and fostering resentment. Fair is flawed. Reality is perfect as is.

Mindfulness = Less "that's not fair" Feelings

If we focus on the unfairness, we begin to act with ego and jealousy. A typical psychology experience repeated countless times include the subjective choice of splitting free money between two people, you and someone else. Almost everyone will accept a 50/50 split, but most (roughly 3 out of 4) will not accept a split they consider "unfair", say 15%/85%. This means both people end up with no money instead of accepting money you never had or even had hope to get in the first place. Theoretically and cognitively, everyone can see this, but when faced with emotions of unfairness by firing of the anterior insula, we make destructive decisions, and everyone loses. This brain bias is not something we should be proud of. It is ego-based and akin to zero-sum gain or loss. We should be weary of thinking anything is not fair. It just is, and mindfulness can help us see that clearer.

Moreover, mindfulness practiced regularly activates the experiential network, or sensory and somatic areas, located in visceral and somatosensory areas associated with body sensation of the brain. Simultaneously, it decreases the activation of the default mode network (DMN), decreasing rumination and, reproach that can lead to sadness and depression. In the Farb's famous study, 8 weeks of mindfulness training (MT) was enough to be considered regular¹³ and see the activation and deregulation.

Mindfulness = More Now = Less Past and Future

Mindfulness = More Sensation = Less Sadness (and Associated Affective Negative Emotions)

Psychedelics, like psilocybin, can quiet the DMN (or ego) as well, but its effects can be short-lived, although some reports transformation lasting up to a year, with increased openness to experience. Regular mindfulness practice can make the changes more permanent and help us reach selflessness, oneness and egolessness, in a more sustainable way.

¹² Bechara, A., Damasio, H., Tranel, D., & Damasio, A. R. *Deciding advantageously before knowing the advantageous strategy*. Science, 275(5304), 1293–1295. 1997

¹³ Farb, N. A. S., et al. Minding one's emotions: *Mindfulness training alters the neural expression of sadness*. Emotion, 2010[Feb], Vol 10[1], 25-33). 2010

Psychedelics = Less Ego = Selflessness = Oneness

Mindfulness = Sustainable Selflessness = Oneness

Even brief MT has been related to the deactivation of self-referential DMN regions and of the amygdala (anxiety and fear), suggesting reduced reactivity, and enhanced insula activation that indicates altered interoception—different inner sensation and perception. Elsewhere in the (front) insula, dopamine is related to anxiety¹⁴ and connected to the DMN¹⁵. In short, mindfulness manages the best of the insula by focusing on the positive available now and reducing negative future (and present fears or injustice value judgements).

Mindfulness = Less Ego + Less Reaction + Reduce Fear

Common Awareness

The highest awareness is communal without group thinking, conformity, confirmation bias or convoluted bs. Basically, one awareness or one consciousness is oneness and the only form of effective enlightenment. It is however hundred thousand times more *uncommon* than common!

It is not telepathy, psychic, chakra, energy or spirituality, but simply an awareness beyond self, social, kin, clan, community, time, thoughts, tribe, species, space and specificity. It is being fully aware although it is likely fleeting because we need a minimum of ego to function in existence. We can however tap into this awareness with greater ease once we have been fully awake and aware a few solid consistent times.

Common sense is easy to come by, yet is not awareness, wisdom or awakening. Awareness is finding the common in everything, while common sense is easy practical conclusions by the common denominator or average human. Awareness is extremely practical yet not easy to conclude. It is counterintuitive yet not so complicated to understand, just much more so to accept. Everyone can understand the idea that we are all connected (7Cs) but few can fathom how every atom, subatomic particle since the beginning of time and until infinity are connected including your consciousness, thoughts, feelings and intuitions that make you believe you have a soul or spirit, or at least a self and some free will. Few can admit how much they lie to themselves constantly and thoroughly, so much so that they genuinely believe in their lies because they do not see them as such.

If you get this, you can skip to chapter 2 directly, but I assume you may not, or even strongly disagree at this point. That is totally fine. I have no (or very low) ego and do not wish to be “right” or you “wrong”. I am not here to convince you either way, simply state what I and many others have discovered on our happiness awakening journey.

If that is difficult for you, be reassured it is very difficult for most. We believe in:

- a) the stories we want (even the negative ones)
- b) the ones we were told that are compelling for various reasons
- c) usually, a mixture of both!

I also, fall into that category so do not worry. I may simply be more attuned and aware of the lies and stories I still tell myself occasionally or daily.

¹⁴ Couderc, Yoni & Reddy, Tanmai & Vardiero, Giovanni & Garg, Archi & Ricci, Daria & d'Almeida, Marion & Nicolas, Celine & Habachi, Tina & Wu, Yue & Gjorgjieva, Julijana & Valjent, Emmanuel & Beyeler, Anna. (2024). Dopamine transmission in the anterior insula shapes the neural coding of anxiety. 10.1101/2024.10.25.620186.

¹⁵ Nogueira, Marlene & Magalhães, Juliana & Sampaio, Adriana & Sousa, Sonia & Coutinho, Joana. (2025). Examining Insula–Default Mode Network Functional Connectivity and Its Relationship with Heart Rate Variability. Brain Sciences. 15. 37. 10.3390/brainsci15010037.

To go beyond and combat common sense, we need a sense of humour and a flexible mind. Luckily both can be trained like a gymnast or yoga teacher can train their body to be more flexible. Maybe in this case we may want to become contortionist at the Cirque du Soleil when it comes to mind flexibility. Let's start with a stretch before you assume what I say is a stretch.

The Cosmic Joke

Let's take our HA journey further through awakening, non-self, and the art of light-hearted enlightenment (12Es). Few are aware or awake yet let us try to see this as one big joke to jolt us from constant dreaming to full-right awakening.

Why level downward to our dullest perception always, and praise that as common sense? The commonest sense is the sense of men asleep, which they express as snoring.

—Jed McKenna

Part I: The Great Unraveling — When the Self Starts to Slip

The Day My Ego Got a Flat Tire

Let me tell you about the day I first suspected I might not be my thoughts. I was sitting in traffic, mentally composing (I don't text & drive) a strongly worded email to someone who had wronged me, when suddenly I noticed something peculiar: I was watching myself think. Wait a minute—if I was watching myself think, who exactly was doing the watching? This is our awareness. Some call it soul or whatnot, same idea, with a few subtle differences, including lack of conscious eternity.

This simple observation is often the first crack in what Buddhists call "the illusion of self"—or what modern neuroscientists might call our "narrative self-model." It's like catching a glimpse of the wizard behind the curtain, except in this case, you peek behind the curtain and find... nobody there. The wizard is a story and supercherie, that is the narration. Still, rush to go see Wicked musical at the movies or even better at the original musical theatre. I saw both and was flabbergasted. We love stories and music for a reason. Long live the Wicked Witch of the West. Evil is not always as it may seem.

The Neuroscience of Non-Self

Recent neuroscience research has begun to catch up with what contemplatives have been saying for millennia. The DMN, which we saw above, is sometimes called our brain's "me, myself and I network," and creates our sense of continuous selfhood. But here's the kicker—this network isn't showing us reality; it's telling us a story about reality.

As neuroscientist Sam Harris notes, "The sense of being a continuous self that is identical to our thoughts and emotions is an illusion that can be dispelled through close attention to conscious experience." Yes, attention through mindfulness can bring awareness, or at least partial awareness and awakening in the waiting.

The Theater of Mind

Imagine consciousness as a theater. Most of us spend our lives completely absorbed in the play, identifying fully with our character. Awakening begins when we realize we're not just the character

—we're also the theater itself. The thoughts, emotions, and sensations are like actors on the stage, but we are the open space in which it all appears.

Buddhist teacher Joseph Goldstein tells a funny story about this realization. He was on a long retreat, dealing with a particularly difficult emotion, when he suddenly realized, "Wait a minute — if this was really 'me,' how could I be observing it?" It would be like an eye trying to see itself.

Part II: The Comedy of Errors — Our Mistaken Identity

The Case of Mistaken Identity

We've all had that embarrassing moment of waving at someone who turns out to be a stranger. But imagine spending your entire life waving at a reflection in a mirror, thinking it was you. That's essentially what we do with our thoughts and emotions. As the Zen saying goes: "Don't mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself." Similarly, don't mistake the thoughts about yourself for yourself.

The Cultural Comedy

Think about it: We believe we are our education and culture, but if you were born in a different time and place, you'd have completely different beliefs, values, and ideas about who you are. It's like being deeply convinced you're a New York Yankees fan when it's just an accident of birth that you weren't born in Boston, Bogota, Buenos Aires, Beijing, Baghdad, Bangkok, Bengaluru, Busan, Berlin or Barcelona. You might have not even loved baseball, but prefer badminton, cricket, curling, football, Muay Thai or Taekwondo. Yes, some people love curling!

Being aware that our likes, dislikes, preferences, religion and language are much less our choice or "us" than we think and remembering this at every moment increases awareness incredibly. We can do this exercise often and preferably with humour. Today, I decided to love curling and became more aware with the thought—equally remembering that thought or any other is not "me", nor my consciousness of that thought and that it is not "me". This very writing language I am thinking and writing in is not me neither—my mother tongue is French due to colonialism of centuries ago! French is not me. The color of my skin is not me. My gender, sex and sexual preferences are not me. The awareness doesn't stop once the spigot is open. No more room for bigots.

Part III: The Science of Selflessness

The Neural Symphony

Modern neuroscience has shown that what we call "self" is more like an orchestra than a conductor. Different brain networks work together to create our sense of self, but there's no central "self" conducting the show.

Research using psychedelics and meditation has shown that when the default mode network's activity decreases, people often report experiences of:

- Unity consciousness
- Dissolution of self-boundaries
- Increased sense of connection (7Cs)
- Reduced anxiety about death
- Enhanced present-moment awareness (4As)

The Evolutionary Psychology Perspective

Our sense of self evolved as a useful survival tool—like an app running on the smartphone of consciousness. The problem isn't having this app; it's becoming so absorbed in it that we forget we're the phone, not the app. We believe we are “us” because it is useful, not true. It helps us gather resources—the origin of greed. I’m afraid—, protect from potential danger (fear) and proclaim ourselves superior (status and sex).

Part IV: Practical Jokes — Exercises in Non-Self

The Mirror Game

Try this: Look in a mirror and try to find the "self" in your reflection. Is it in your eyes? Your face? Your body? The more you look, the more you realize you're looking at an image, not the real you. But then what is the real you?

Do the same with a photograph, a video, a voice recording. Can you put a distance between that mirage and the reinforced story of you? Where are you? Peek-a-boo! The illusion is child's play (8Ps).

I am not suggesting you do not believe in your beliefs, thoughts and stories. I am suggesting you do not believe in anything at all, especially “you”. Hard to do? Look again. Look until you find nothing at all. Perhaps only a story and venue you can see as such. Nothing and everything at once.

The Thought-Watching Comedy Show

Sit quietly and watch your thoughts like you're watching a sitcom. Notice how they come and go without your control. If you were your thoughts, wouldn't you be able to control them? As meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg says, "If thoughts were real, you'd be able to hide from them by putting your hands over your eyes!" Some meditations and visualizations are ways to practice observing your thoughts, controlling some of them and focusing your attention—more in *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention!* —, lowering the DMN self-reference.

Part V: The Great Liberation — Finding Freedom in Selflessness

The Cosmic Dance

Once you start seeing through the illusion of self, life becomes more like a dance and less like a battle. You're not a separate entity fighting against the universe; you're the universe experiencing itself in human form. As Alan Watts put it: "You are the universe experiencing itself. You are not 'in' the universe; you are the universe." With this observation and awareness, acceptance becomes easier as well and things seem “less personal”. They simply are and you can respond (or not) without reacting. We will see how not to resist and react, but rather respond in the next chapter.

The Humor in it All

The cosmic joke is that what we've been searching for—peace (8Ps), happiness, fulfillment—was never lost in the first place. We were looking for it from the perspective of a separate self, which is like trying to find your glasses while wearing them. Contentment (7Cs) is always a possibility instead of ego-based aversion and desire to situations, stimuli, people or other.

Humor helps. Self-derision even more. Especially, when there is no self! It is much better than self-delusion or delusion of self.

Part VI: Practical Applications — Living as No-Self

Relationships in Dance

When you realize you're not a separate self, relationships transform. Instead of two separate egos trying to get their needs met, it becomes two expressions of life dancing together. You can look for synchronicity and coherence or enjoy the individual freestyle with more freedom and flexibility. It does not have to be “my way or the highway” and no one is “right” or “wrong”, as I mentioned earlier. Dance on! Whatever dance you fancy. Learn a new dance if you can with creativity (7Cs) and curiosity (7Cs).

Find compassion (7Cs) in relationship, not with empathy but total inclusion. Feel people's suffering as your own in oneness, not as a discreet shared negativity. Wish to decrease suffering while acknowledging most are not self-aware and most will never be. It is not sad, frustrating or frightening, it just is. Use patience (8Ps), maintain the purpose (8Ps) you “choose” and which is constantly changing. Make sure to choose the other as you would choose you. Not one more than the other. One and the other. Always awareness of the big picture. Sometimes prioritize “you” knowing your limited importance, often choose “other” which is only another expression of you and “one”. Mostly choose peace (8Ps), even in an energetic and lively dance.

Work and Creativity

Without the heavy burden of maintaining a fixed self-image, work becomes more playful (8Ps) and creative (7Cs). You're no longer working “for something”, “for somebody”, or to “be somebody” — you're working as an expression of what “you” are at the moment. You can find more passion (8Ps) and purpose (8Ps), as well as appreciation (4As) in action with aware attention.

Work effectively and effortlessly. Perseverance (8Ps) comes easy to those who do not worry. Work from a place of care (11Cs), craftsmanship (11Cs), and commitment (11Cs), as we will see later in the happiness series. Embark on the journey with no expectation to really experience. Contribute no more, nor less, than your best unadulterated presence (8Ps).

Imagine me writing this late at night having compassion for you, although I will likely never know you. I seek no monetary or notoriety reward for this task. I am only fully present with ideas who are not me, nor mine. I wish to enhance, not undermine yet I am unsure of the results, nor do I attach much value, worth or identity to them. My writing with purpose is enough. Ego has left the building, but the building blocks of oneness are still at play. You and I are connected (7Cs) anyway and will always be in one way—even if you never read these words. I know this with certainty and in a moment, I am also willing to let go of that thought or belief. They add nothing to the inherent oneness and no-self.

Dealing with Difficulty

Problems don't disappear, but they become less personal. As the Zen saying goes: “Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional.” The suffering comes from our personal identification (ego) with pain. Pain is physical and suffering is mental and not obligatory. Several studies even show that some physical pain can be lessened with a particular mental disposition and conviction. Mindfulness training can also help chronic pain patients as proposed and exposed by brilliant stress reduction expert Jon Kabat-Zinn who recommends body scan mindfulness exercises we talked about earlier as the best form of mindfulness meditation for pain conditions. He advises practicing the exercise every day for 45 minutes. I told you awareness can be very practical. Pain less. Suffering much less.

Part VII: Common Pitfalls and Misconceptions

The Spiritual Ego Trap

Beware of turning "no-self" into a new identity. As Ram Dass humorously noted, "If you think you're enlightened, go spend a week with your family." Awareness should not be a badge to be boastful but rather a rude cold shower that reinvigorates you—not reinforces your ego. Cold exposure is good for happiness too. Metaphorically, mentally and physically. More on that and other body "hacks" in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*.

Extremely aware or awake people are not a special breed of superior, "spiritual" or smart people. They are born and die like everyone. They make "mistakes" (but may not perceive them as such), they have urges (but may or may not control them better), they sometimes suffer (hopefully less), they still directly or indirectly bring upon suffering to others. They may just be aware of all this to a higher extent.

If you become highly aware, good for you. And also, who cares? Praise is not sought by the truly aware. It is as inconsequential as disapproval, condemnation and loathing. They are all stories, and mostly ego-based stories. If some stories steaming from awareness can inspire and increase compassion (7Cs), why not—I am even all for it—, but it is not the state of awareness alone that deserves undue attention. It may be what comes from it and even that should be treated with caution.

Aware or not, awake or sleeping, we are all one. It is also good to sleep. No judgement. If you are aware, don't say about it, do about it. Don't expect, expand further. Don't needlessly add, subtract even more. You are not the core. You are not. *D'accord*? Agree? These are not the Four Agreements of Miguel Ruiz. The Bible, the Koran, the bibliography of Kundera. All stories. And there are useful lessons in many. You can worship and act accordingly. Whatever you want, I agree.

If you are awake, wake up from your awoken belief. Awareness is a process. Oneness is the only supposed state—the ultimate connection (7Cs). If you identify to anything, you are still not aware. If you are aware, you have no identify, including this nonsense non-self / self-aware superiority.

I am not aware, the noun. I hope only to be the verb form, which includes not being an "I", nor identifying to a form. These words speak through me, the intricacy of language and technology. They do not belong to me—and that does not make me special, nor some kind of prophet neither.

The Nihilism Trap

Non-self doesn't mean you don't exist; it means you exist in a different way than you thought. You too are not a noun but a verb—not a fixed entity but an ongoing process. Embrace change and impermanence. You exist and are not the same as before or after. Non-self is a lesser form of oneness and is the opposite of nihilism because it explains that you are part of a great "one"—not part the Edmonton Oilers with the *Great One*. Have fun with the idea and don't be depressed that you are not the center of the universe like the Earth or the Sun are not either.

Remember that drugs or Gods can soothe your non-self distress or purposelessness anxiety. Use them both wisely and increasingly sparingly with your advanced awareness. Spiritual stories and street drugs can help momentary clarity and for some that will suffice. Others may be tempted to at least see what else science has uncovered in a small scale towards a better common awareness—not common-sense sensibilities. In case that is of mild interest, prayers are free, and drugs can be relatively inexpensive. They also require less effort and discomfort. I would not blame you. And you are also me—I am not big on self, nor self-blame.

Part VIII: The Science of Awakening

Neuroplasticity and Transformation

Research shows that long-term meditation practice can reshape the brain, leading to:

- Increased gray matter in areas associated with self-awareness
- Reduced activity in the DMN
- Enhanced connectivity (7Cs) between brain regions
- Improved emotional regulation (ER) and equanimity
- Greater compassion (7Cs) and empathy—the former being better than the latter especially if emotional empathy instead of the intellectual variety

Now, you may say, well meditation, long-term and practice are all words that are not particularly appealing alone, let alone together. Again, I agree. I have stopped meditating myself—perhaps I should start again. At least, now we all have a more aware choice between prayer, meditation and drugs. I may say, it depends on the day....

Meditation is a vague and vast term. There are many forms and particular practices—3 prominent types were cherry-picked in sub-section below. Perhaps try a few to find the one that fits you. Ironically, the same could be said for religions and drugs. I am not advocating my readers to take any drugs or to switch religions (say my editors and lawyers for clarity (11Cs), profit maximizing and minimizing publication risks). I am not against my editors, lawyers or money—contrary to popular belief. I am not advocating meditation either, just relaying some findings. I think aware attention may be even more important than meditation, prayer or your favorite drug, and will delve into this mess in *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention!*.

The Psychology of Awakening

Psychologists are beginning to study what they call "persistent non-symbolic experience" — the stable recognition of non-dual awareness or oneness. Research indicates this shift is associated with:

- Reduced anxiety and depression
- Enhanced wellbeing
- Greater resilience
- Increased creativity (7Cs)
- Improved relationships—even if the others are half-aware or unaware, although having both aware makes relationships even more effective and easy-going. Remember to dance! Cultivate individual and relational awareness if you can and thank me later.

Haha! I told you awareness was practical. Not just the financial thing above. Paying bills is only for the sleeping masses who still believe in the self. Hmmm... perhaps not. Non-self doesn't mean I don't exist. No food means I will no longer exist.

Quantum Physics

The insights of quantum physics align with insights about non-self. As physicist Carlo Rovelli notes, "The world is not a collection of things, it's a collection of events." Quantum entanglement, a seemingly strange phenomenon of persistent connectivity (7Cs) at the quantum level is also coherent with oneness and non-self. Don't ask me why I spent weeks reading articles my quantum physicist professor friend sent

me to try to disentangle this entanglement thing. Fun endeavor in curiosity (7Cs), I guess. Awareness is a verb—with clear rewards but that require effort like Hungarian or French grammar.

Part IX: Cultural Perspectives on Non-Self

Buddhist Psychology

The Buddha's insight into anatta (non-self) wasn't just philosophical — it was a practical observation about the nature of experience. He noticed that when we look closely, we can't find a permanent, unchanging self anywhere in experience.

Scientific Materialism

Even materialist science, which typically dismisses spiritual insights, has come to similar conclusions about the constructed nature of self. As neuroscientist Thomas Metzinger puts it, "Nobody ever was or had a self."

Part X: Practices for Awakening

Meditation: The Laboratory of Self-Investigation

Different types of meditation serve different purposes in the awakening process:

1. **Mindfulness (Vipassana):**
 - Develops clear seeing and clarity of experiences
 - Reveals the impermanence of phenomena
 - Shows the constructed nature of self
2. **Concentration (Samatha):**
 - Stabilizes awareness and attention
 - Reduces identification with thoughts
 - Develops tranquility
3. **Self-Inquiry:**
 - Investigates the nature of self
 - Questions assumptions
 - Reveals natural awareness

There are many, many more, but as we decided, meditation can be a bore.

Daily Life Practices

1. **Morning Not Me:** Begin the day with a mindful observation of thoughts. Watch how thoughts arise and pass without a solid "thinker" behind them, like clouds moving through an empty sky. Notice that you can be aware of thoughts without identifying with them.
2. **The "Who Am I?":** Throughout the day, ask yourself: "Who/what is aware of this experience?"
3. **The "Not Mine" Game:** Notice your tendency to say "my" and acknowledge it is not "yours".
4. **The Equanimity Emotional Regulation:** Notice and label emotions without judgment or reactivity. When strong emotions arise, investigate them with curiosity (7Cs). Notice how they're composed of physical sensations, thoughts, and memories—all impermanent elements with no solid core. This helps loosen identification with emotions.

5. **Space Listening:** During conversations, practice deep listening without preparing your response. Notice how understanding naturally emerges in the space between people when the separate "self" steps back.
6. **Automatic Breathing:** Take regular breaks to observe your breath. Notice how breathing happens by itself—you don't decide to breathe. This reveals how much of "your" life functions without a controller.
7. **Body-Life-Universe:** When walking outside, contemplate how your body is made of elements borrowed from the earth—water, minerals, air. Feel how each step connects you with the ground that supports all life. Extend all the elements to the universe and find awe (4As).
8. **Kindness Not Me:** Practice random acts of kindness without seeking recognition. Notice how joy arises naturally when we act from connection rather than self-interest.
9. **Decision Without Me:** When making decisions, notice how choices emerge from the totality of circumstances rather than a separate decider. Even the sense of "choosing" arises dependent on conditions. Warning: this may shake your fundamental faith in free will,
10. **Notice Not Me:** During daily activities, pause periodically to notice how your actions affect others and how others' actions affect you. A simple smile exchanged with a stranger reveals our inherent connectedness (7Cs).
11. **Night Not Me:** Before sleep, reflect on how your day's experiences were shaped by countless causes and conditions beyond "your" control—other people, weather, timing, previous actions. See how life flows by itself. Accept (4As) it.

These practices work gradually over time to reveal the constructed nature of our sense of separate self and the deeper reality of interdependence. The key is consistency and gentle investigation rather than forcing insights.

Part XI: The Journey of Awakening

Stage 1: Conceptual Understanding

- Intellectual grasp of non-self
- Beginning to question assumptions
- Initial insights into the nature of mind

Stage 2: Glimpses and Insights

- Temporary experiences of non-dual awareness
- Moments of seeing through the illusion
- Brief tastes of freedom

Stage 3: Deepening and Integration

- Longer periods of clear seeing
- Integration of insights into daily life
- Reduced identification with thoughts and emotions

Stage 4: Stable Recognition

- Consistent awareness of true nature
- Natural expression of wisdom and compassion
- Being mainly aware and unattached to the separate self

Stage 5: Full Awareness

- Accepting no-self and no free will

- Living as awareness rather than as a separate self
- Shedding and seeing the deepest delusions and illusions as such

Part XII: Common Questions and Concerns

Q: If there's no self, who makes decisions?

A: Decisions happen, just as digestion happens. The sense of a decider is added after the fact.

Q: Won't I lose my personality or abilities?

A: Nothing is lost except the illusion of separation. Your unique expression continues, but without the burden of self-importance.

Q: How does this affect relationships?

A: Relationships become more authentic and less needy when we're not trying to maintain a particular self-image, self-preservation or auto-justification narratives.

Q: Does this mean that my life has no meaning or purpose?

A: On the contrary, this means that your life has a meaning in conjunction with the entirety of existence and you have to worry less about meaning, while finding purpose simply in existence.

Part XIII: The Fruits of Awakening

Freedom from Self-Concern

When you're not maintaining a separate self, there's incredible freedom and ease. If you are looking for freedom—which most say they do but do not really seek it fully (they unconsciously want to be told what to do because that is less scary)—awakening and awareness are the greatest freedoms one can aspire to gain. The possibilities open in action, thought and freedom from fear are plentiful.

Imagine what you can do if you have no more fear of dying—and I am not talking about dying for your God or country. You have no country. No Country for Old Men wrote Cormac McCarthy and No Country for All Men and Women, I say. Oneness and nothing less.

Natural Compassion

Without the barrier of separate self, compassion flows naturally. Compassion (7Cs) for others, as well as for self—although there is no self! Selfless self-compassion?

Comperion (7Cs) also arises from seeing the happiness someone has as your own with feeling the need to rob or redirect it towards you. There is no “you” so enjoy all automatically.

Spontaneous Joy

Joy is our natural state when we're not contracted around a separate self. See The Cosmic Joy in the section below.

Part XIV: Living as Awareness

The Dance of Form and Emptiness

- Recognize you are the awareness in which all appears
- Allow life to flow naturally
- Don't take yourself too seriously

The Art of Non-Dual Living

- Act without actor
- Love without lover
- Create without creator

The Ultimate Joke

The ultimate cosmic joke is that what we're looking for is what's looking. As spiritual teacher Adyashanti says, "Enlightenment is absolutely nothing special. It is simply being actually, fundamentally, radically okay with what is." We will see the rewards of acceptance in the next chapter.

Conclusion: The Lightness of Being

The journey of awakening might sound serious, but it's oppositely about lightening up—literally and figuratively. It's about seeing through the heavy story of self we've been carrying and recognizing the light and lightness of awareness that we already are.

Remember:

- You're not your thoughts (thank goodness!)
- You're not your emotions (what a relief!)
- You're not your story (it was getting a bit repetitive anyway)
- You're the aware space in which all this appears (surprise!)

As the Zen master said when asked about enlightenment: "You'd be surprised how little difference it makes." And yet, paradoxically, it makes all the difference in the world. Awareness or the only real "enlightenment" (12Es). It is the first step—or giant leap—in the HA journey.

So, here's to the journey of awakening—may it be filled with insight, laughter, and the recognition that what you're seeking is what's seeking. As Ram Dass beautifully put it: "The game is not about becoming somebody, it's about becoming nobody."

And in that nobody-ness, we find the everybody-ness that we've been looking for all along. Now isn't that worth a good laugh?

The universe is not only stranger than we think, it's stranger than we can think. But that's okay—we are that strangeness itself, dressed up in human form, playing (8Ps) peek-a-boo with itself. And if that's not funny, I don't know what is. The End (or is it just the beginning?)

If you got this far and still think you're a separate self... well, who's reading these words anyway? Accept you are part of the whole. As weird as it first seems. There is no other way or plausible conclusion to the story. If you still believe otherwise you are continuing to lie to yourself—or to the part that still believes it is a self.

I move with the tides on an ocean where the difference between self and other becomes merely theoretical. Even in the dreamstate my character is almost fully dissolved back into the ocean, so for instance, an outside observer might say that Jed McKenna wrote these books, but from my perspective there is no such distinction. Distinctions is a dreamstate phenomenon and even though I exist and I write in the dreamstate to publish dreamed up books for dreamed up readership, I don't see things as being distinguished from one another the way I did before awakening.

—Jed McKenna

The Cosmic Joy

Joy is a state that can be more easily accessed through awareness. Inner joy can be cultivated through awareness and be a constant part of our lives.

True happiness comes not from external circumstances that are as changeable as clouds, but from awakening to the sun of awareness that is always shining.

-Pema Chödrön

Let's begin with plain old everyday joy—that delightful burst of pleasure when your dog greets you like you've been gone for years (even though it was just a quick trip to get mail), or when you finally nail that parallel parking job that had pedestrians gathering to watch the show. Scientists have found that these moments of joy trigger a cascade of neurotransmitters including dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin—what I like to call nature's own happy hour cocktail, minus the hangover, and possibly missing the endorphin for a pitch perfect quartet. As Mark Twain quipped, "The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why." I'd add a third: the day you realize joy can be found in both life's grand moments and its delightfully ordinary ones.

Inner joy runs deeper, like an underground spring that keeps flowing even when the surface world is experiencing a drought of happiness. This is what the Dalai Lama was getting at when he said, "Happiness is not something ready-made. It comes from your own actions." Research in positive psychology, spearheaded by Martin Seligman, has shown that cultivating inner joy through practices like gratitude and mindfulness rewires our brains for increased well-being. It's like giving your brain a happiness upgrade—except unlike your smartphone, this update actually makes things work better and doesn't mysteriously eat up all your storage space. We will do part 2 of the upgrade in the next chapter, expanding on mindfulness and acceptance, and part 3 with gratitude and appreciation in chapter 3.

Then there's Cosmic Joy — the kind that hits you when you're staring up at the stars and suddenly remember that you're made of the same stuff as those twinkling lights. As Carl Sagan beautifully put it, "We are made of star stuff. We are a way for the cosmos to know itself." This perspective has been reported by astronauts experiencing the "Overview Effect" —a profound shift in awareness when viewing Earth from space. Though personally, I find similar cosmic joy in contemplating how my morning coffee and I are both made of atoms that were forged in the hearts of dying stars billions of years ago. Talk about a cosmic caffeine connection! This will also be upgrade number 4 with all the awe we can muster in chapter 4—mundane or insanely perspective changing.

The intersection of these types of joy creates what researchers call "eudaimonic well-being"—a fancy term for the deep satisfaction that comes from living a meaningful life. A 2013 study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences found that people who experience meaning and purpose (8Ps) in their lives show different gene expression patterns than those who focus solely on pleasure-seeking. As the philosopher Alan Watts observed, "The meaning of life is just to be alive. It is so plain and so obvious and so simple. And yet, everybody rushes around in a great panic as if it were necessary to achieve something beyond themselves."

Existence is Enough

This layered understanding of joy helps explain why some people can maintain their inner light even in difficult circumstances. It's like having a Swiss Army knife of joy—sometimes you need the bottle opener for celebration, sometimes you need the compass for finding your way through dark times, and sometimes you need the tiny scissors to cut through life's absurdities. As the comedian Bill Hicks once

said, "The world is like a ride at an amusement park. And when you choose to go on it, you think it's real because that's how powerful our minds are." The trick, perhaps, is to enjoy the ride while remembering that you're part of something infinitely more magnificent than any roller coaster could ever be.

Awake is Less

Awake is just awake. It's nothing more, it's everything less. My state is natural and easy. I carry no baggage. I labour under no delusion. I don't spend my lifetime animating a fictional persona. All paradox lies with the unawakened state. The awakened don't have something the unawakened are missing, it's the other way around. The unawakened possess massive structures of false belief. They create and maintain these vast realms of past, present, and future; of great meaning and importance; of a deep and wide emotional range; all woven together out of sheer nothingness. Something from nothing; that's the magic, that's the special state. The unawakened state is the one that requires such ceaseless dedication and devotion, and which seems so fantastically improbable. The awakened state is nothing compared to that...

The life force I'm not using to project false self is now available for much more fun and interesting purposes. It's a whole different universe once all that petty self crap has been left behind.

—Jed McKenna

Now that we are aware, or at least aware enough and in the process of non-self awakening, let us learn to accept even the unacceptable. Accept the unavoidable. Accept all. Accept the awakening and also continue to play in the dream without believing in it if you want.

Unlearning Process

There is almost no difference between being miserable and thinking about yourself.

— Jordan Peterson

We now know that being egotistical or identifying with the ego does not allow us to be fully aware or fully happy in a sustainable way. Most of us however still are unaware or unwilling to contemplate and comprehend all the ways our personal and collective egos get in the way of awareness, awakening and unadulterated joy. "Inner growth does not stop; it continues," remark Dr. Daniels & Dr. Piechowski. "It does not take place in stages that correspond to childhood, adolescence and adulthood". It is not age or experience specific. There are only sleepers or people who are awake—or reached *Human Adulthood* as per McKenna. But even awake people, sometime dream, while other dream even when they think they are awake.

Awareness is a practice and a process. In simple terms, "proceed on the hypothesis that everything you are is a lie and everything you know is wrong and try to disprove it," suggests McKenna if you want to sit down and perform *spiritual autolysis*, cultivate negative self-esteem and transcendental self-loathing. It may take months, years and most do not have the courage (7Cs) or capacity (mental fortitude) to be awake, even for a couple minutes, let alone days or months. How can we possibly engage

in awakening and make it? Most pretend they are awake and yet clearly still soundly sleeping. For me, who has endeavored the constant battle for decades and saw the “light” clearly a few times, I would say that the entity referred as “I”—the projection of the person my parents named Christian—is partially awake. At least one-eye open. It is okay too to sleep and dream. Just better to know your dreams and many delusions which includes “yourself” entirely.

Uncover and unlearn. All. Repeat. “It takes a great effort and care to unmask a long-standing false belief, but freedom from our distorted worldview will give us the space to embed the positive beliefs that will give energy to our manifesting,” concludes Dr. James R. Doty. We need to unmask decades of self-deceit and delusions and continue to unmask and dig deeper every day. See the illusions and lies for that they are and remember you are the greatest liar. Consciously and unconsciously, you firmly believe limiting beliefs that do not serve you anymore. The ultimate truth of course is that there is no you, but perhaps that is too steep a climb for most so simply keep unlearning and breaking down your mental prison brick by brick.

Actor Ethan Hawke explains in the first episode of The Craft of Acting Criterion Special that acting “when it is going well, you actually feel the absence of self which is the wonderful feeling where you don’t even remember how it went. You feel like yourself is gone, and this other thing happens—and it’s a dance”. Hawke maintains that this non-self allows more spontaneity, surprising “yourself” and is “actual living”.

Another award-winning actor, Al Pacino, talks about “when you can disappear inside the metaphor”. The fact is, in “real” life we are all acting. The problem is we are acting like superstar prima donnas. When we are aware that all the “supporting actors”, “staff”, “crew”, “extras” are all as important or more than “us” and that the movie is not even about us, we can better play our role in service of the greater purpose (8Ps) and not be stuck being a capricious, pretentious, egomaniac on the set of life. Life is an ensemble cast, and your ego is every day normally way worst than Charlie Sheen’s ego-driven spirals. In 2011, the Two and a Half Men star went on a profanity-laced tirade against the series’ co-creator and was ultimately fired from the CBS comedy in his very public departure. He demanded a \$3 million per episode salary and made grandiose claims about having “tiger blood” and being a “total bitchin’ rock star from Mars.” His behavior led to his firing from the highest-paying TV role at the time. Your thoughts are much worse than Charlie’s every day because you still think life is about you. As for your behavior, most times even when you are not on TV demanding millions, you are in your life demanding so many things from people, God and the universe that are impossible. You must unlearn, detach and accept you are not important at all. And your worries have little importance, your aversions or desires either. My good friend once told me that “awareness is not addicted to anything.”

You *must* not do anything. However, you should accept, and we will see why in the next chapter.

*Life is nothing but a dream,
and if we are artists,
then we can create our life with Love,
and our dreams becomes
a masterpiece of art.*

—Don Miguel Ruiz, The Mastery of Love

“Attaining self-knowledge requires patience, determination and courage. Inner growth of this nature, once it starts, does not stop,” say Daniels & Piechowski. Although a highly advanced multilevel development may lead to a cumulative change, like Peace Pilgrim who gave up all her possessions and ended up walking for (inner and other) peace for 28 years. In her case the change was “so radical that she was rejected by many of her friends and family because they didn’t understand her. Some thought she had simply lost her mind. Others found her the most authentic person they knew; many were moved by her example.” This has happened to me in almost every way, and several times. I must warn you that you may need an abundance of courage (7Cs), patience (8Ps) and perseverance (8Ps) if you want to attain peace (8Ps), contentment (7Cs), “self-knowledge” and awaken to the intimate knowledge of non-self. True awareness—and you don’t need to sell all your possessions, but it will be a (hopefully welcomed) challenge.

Challenge accepted.

Chapter 2: Acceptance

The great awakening to happiness comes when we realize we don't have to fix everything — we just have to witness it with an open heart.

- Mark Nepo

Acceptance in appearance seems easy. *Accept*, that's it? That is one of the four biggest windows into happiness? It seems simple until you realize how much you resist to so many things consciously or not—constantly, day after day. If you took a step back, it rather looks like you want to struggle and remain in your bubble, like Chinese tea. Chinese Daoism however is cleverer and teaches you to not only accept but “go with the flow”. Yet, people resist to accept simple things like the wrong order on their food or favorite coffee combination. Imagine how they resist to accept more seemingly complex life events like breakups, job changes or career opportunities (euphemism for “getting fired”), sickness, death, financial loss, friendship hiccups, legal adventures and anything in between.

Why Resist?

Ego consists largely of resistance.

-Eckart Tolle

Tolle suggests that you should “bring acceptance into your nonacceptance” and “bring surrender into your nonsurrender.” Why do we resist? Because our ego wants to fight and impose its warped idea of ideal reality that does match the actual inevitable reality, so it resists it. We know now from chapter 1 that our ego is delusional, and that reality is immensely superior. So why fight a losing battle? And why fight with ourselves if we are part of everything?

Instead of accepting, we get agitated, anxious, annoyed—often annoying—and angry. These are not the correct 4As! We resist because we arrogantly think we know better than the universe and we are going to protest and pick a fight with it, with us and everyone else. Another usually useless A is avoid.

Well, you can take up your picket signs and get ready to be on strike or take your pocket knife for a losing bloody battle or ego-based fight yet you know the universe does not negotiate and you remaining on strike and pissed off will in no way change the fabric of reality you experience. It will simply maintain your negative interpretation of the objectively perfect world. Perfect? Yes, it works in all its unfathomable complexity that we may never understand fully, yet simply work—like clockwork and with consistency. It has done so arguably continuously for a very very long time, which means that our very limited, human-scale and ego-based opinion matters much less than we may think.

The universe worked fine before you were born. It worked when you were shitting everywhere and did not know how to speak. It worked when people loved each other—hopefully your parents. It worked when people tried to kill each other—maybe sometimes your parents. It worked when people did kill each other in countless huge and long wars, or domestic violence, greed, hatred and organized or disorganized crime. It worked when tsunamis, volcanoes, hurricanes and earthquakes killed humans and other animals. It worked before humans ever walked the Earth. It worked before animals. It worked before Earth. It will also probably work afterwards—with or without pompous us. I am sorry to tell you, but your ego is inflated, and the universe does not particularly care about you. It has nothing against you.

After all it created you and kept you alive this far. Simply, your thoughts and self-righteous frustrations are unlikely to make it change its course. Your resistance, complaints or even prayers to any overseeing God metaphor will not likely magically make your dreams come true like the fable of fairies, genies, witches and wishing wells. Even if the Devil or God could be wish-granters, you may bother them in their grandeur but how often has your supplications or subtle demands made them even frown or notice?

Your recalcitrance is only noticed by you and the people around you. It does not look good on you but rather shows how unflexible and not able to adapt to the changing world around you. Adaptability is one of human's greatest strengths yet often comes after useless mental roadblocks. Why not go straight to the good part instead or pretending you have magical powers to change reality to your will?

Now, that does that mean you should never resist anything? You should just accept the world and not even be an active participant?

Of course not! What you should do is not to resist reality. What you can do is make appropriate actions to change the upcoming future. You can resist an unfair government with actions that are violent or nonviolent like protesters around the world from the slave Spartacus to the martyr Martin Luther King Jr. Perhaps the French Revolution being a sanguine and necessary example to topple the oppressive government structure that happened to be called monarchy at the time. The science-fiction television show *V* shows the humans mount a resistance against alien reptilian invaders. History shows people who resisted racism, slavery, oppression, colonialism, authoritarian regimes, etc. were at times successful to bring about a new reality. They did so by their actions and not by praying or complaining alone. Resistance in you is not necessary—often counterproductive—, only action for change is required. Resistance in thought brings you suffering. Resistance in action can decrease pain and suffering of others with compassion (7Cs).

Resistance in Action >>> Resistance in Thought

Mental or emotional resistance can be in the form of blaming, complaining, resentment, irritation, impatience or having an issue with someone or something. These are all manifestations of the ego. If you want compassionate change with a purpose (8Ps), perseverance (8Ps) and patience (8Ps), take positive (8Ps) action instead of negative mental reaction and reactivity.

Compassionate Change = Purpose + Patience + Perseverance + Positivity

Compassionate Change = Nonreactive + Nonjudgmental

Active aware resistance for positive change can have its use, like resisting other's uncompassionate acts, or our hurtful habits, negative addictive thoughts, emotions or behavior. Negative reactive resistance is a recipe for suffering and prolonged agony. Remember that you are the cook, so choose your ingredients wisely. ANTs (automatic negative thoughts) should not be on that list. Dr. Daniel Amen suggests to reframe these negative thoughts into positive, empowering thoughts (PETs). He adds, not surprisingly, that practicing mindfulness to focus on the present moment can reduce the impact of ANTs. He also suggests to recognizing the thought and acknowledge it as just a thought, not the truth. This is a continuation of the awareness practices we saw in chapter 1.

Positive Active Aware Responsive Resistance/Nonresistance >> Negative Reactive Resistance

You can turn a situation quickly—almost immediately with mental practice, presence (8Ps) and awareness (4As)—from suffering to simple soothing acceptance through the power of allowing existence—life itself—without resistance. When you resist, oppose and contradict, you cut off that power and beauty. Beware however that these refractory negative stories or subtleties are rarely easy to see to the depth of their deceit. That is why we need as much awareness as we are now equipped to practice from

the previous chapter. The ego is the center of self-delusions and enhances itself through conflict, clinging, defensiveness, resistance and reactivity. Self-created suffering is thus seen as external instead of internal.

Suffering = Self

This ego conflict may remain eternal until you unmask any and every of its masterful manifestations with acute awareness (4As). You can resist and react, or accept (4 A), pause with patience (8Ps) and respond accordingly.

Resistance reinforces rigidity. With awareness and acceptance, we can have the mental flexibility to decide better actions or nonactions. Neurologically, resistance is seeded in the emotional limbic system and the habit-forming motivation-reward pathway. When we feel a threat or are disappointed because of expectation, we feel physical discomfort. Acceptance is having the courage (7Cs) to go beyond the discomfort and find the peace (8Ps) and higher purpose (8Ps) with awareness and letting go.

Let's get practical. How do you accept things that seem genuinely unacceptable? Like when someone eats the last cookie without asking, or when your favorite show gets cancelled on a cliffhanger, or when more serious life challenges come your way.

1. **Reality Check:** First, ask yourself, "Is this actually happening?" If yes, congratulations! You've completed step one of acceptance—acknowledging that reality is doing its thing, regardless of your feelings about it. Awareness is your friend! You may want to put things in the bigger picture context of your entire life and cultivate appreciation and awe as we will see in chapters 3 and 4. Whatever you are resisting is most likely much less important than you think. A trick I use is to imagine how this event you are resisting will impact your life in one or ten years. I often laugh immediately when I realize how foolish my inner resistance is. Better laugh than cry. For instance, my American friend face planted snowboarding with my brother and another friend. He lost consciousness, had memory loss and couldn't remember my name for hours. He didn't know he was even in Canada and had a nosebleed from the fall. Red blood on the white snow and his state was alarming but I remained cool, confident, caring and helpful—so I assume. Acceptance and action, no fear or exaggerated concern. My other friend panicked a bit and eventually cried blaming himself and others in his head for the choice of run we took once our friend was in the ambulance. I hugged and reassured him too. Accept and act. Once at the hospital my injured friend who had a concussion and would have to rest for weeks was making jokes about his situation and we laughed with him, made more jokes and took a picture in the hospital for a "fun" souvenir. Although it could have been worse, I was ready to do whatever it takes—talk more to the various medical staff, call his family, etc.—and be a comforting presence instead of complaining that we were missing a nice jazz show, that it was my fault my friend was injured or that I would feel guilty and sad about my friend's unfortunate accident. "I bet you didn't think you were going to see me in a robe today," he joked about his hospital gown. Once he was laughing, I joked that he was now finally a real skier/snowboarder as my brother had broken his arm and I had broken my leg skiing years ago. Nice stories to tell a year or ten later—in this case, not even a day. Just part of life. He was now part of the gang—had survived a ski accident—, and we laughed whole heartedly. Similarly, my son broke his clavicle playing soccer (football outside of Canada/US) and when he called me, he said with a smile and laugh: "don't worry about it. I am happy because I always wanted to break a bone, so now it's done." It takes practice to feel reactive negative emotions and do mental reframing quickly to accept and make like of it, so it can be done by step by first feeling the emotions, especially if they are strong and take a hold of you. Just

accept the emotions too and know you can change them, and in a progressively quicker timeframe. As you can tell, my son had had years of training!

2. **Feeling Flood:** Allow yourself to feel all the feelings of resistance. Mad? Feel it. Sad? Feel it. Want to write a strongly worded email to someone? Feel it (maybe don't send it, but feel it). Then feel it less and less with practice and emotional learning. Emotional regulation will allow less resistance and reactivity so you can accept more readily what needs to be accepted eventually. Imagine that you still have the remnants of the untrained child brain that goes on tantrums, for cookies or other things. Like that annoying child, it can be trained. Try to be aware and accepting, not annoying, even if you often only annoy yourself.

3. **Pivot:** Here's where the magic happens. Instead of asking "Why is this happening to me?" ask "What's next?" It's like changing the channel from the Drama channel to the Solution channel. There are no problems, remember? Only opportunities. This is the mental restructuring that can be taught with techniques like cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). In short, it is easier to accept when you see events and situations with more positive, funny, empowering or transformative stories than the automatic negative stories that initially come up like that life is unjust and unfair, or that "you deserve better." You deserve nothing as we saw in chapter 1, so tell yourself positive stories and pivot from antagonism to action with swift acceptance.

Remember the Borg from Star Trek with their catchphrase "Resistance is futile"? They were onto something, even if their delivery needed work. Resistance to what is actually happening is about as effective as trying to teach quantum physics to a goldfish—it's not going to work, and you're just going to exhaust yourself—and likely others—in the process. And do you even understand quantum physics to teach it? And was the goldfish murdered by a family member?

The beauty of recognizing the futility of resistance is that it's incredibly liberating. It's like finally putting down a heavy backpack you've been carrying for no reason. The situation might not change, but your shoulder feels a lot better.

Why Accept?

Watch what happens when you don't name an experience as "bad" and instead bring an inner acceptance, an inner "yes" to it, and let it be as it is. Whatever your life situation is, how would you feel if you completely accepted it as it is—right Now?

-Eckhart Tolle

What happens when we accept then? Do we admit defeat and feel like a life loser? On the contrary, we move on and unburden ourselves no worse off than we thought we were and often better off if we carry along an experience, a lesson, an opportunity, a gratitude and positive attitude. We often need to accept to appreciate. Appreciation (4As) becomes easier after we fully accept what is for what it is without judgement and negativity.

Acceptance allows space and time to contemplate or act. It allows the narrow negative focus on a single aspect to broaden to more options. Neurologically, it downregulates reactive parts of our brain mentioned above to enlist the help of our senses to find beauty, of our executive central network (ECN) to find solutions and of our default mode network (DMN) to find awe-inspiring stories, purpose (8Ps), compersion (7Cs) and compassion (7Cs). Acceptance calms stress hormones like cortisol and recalibrates

the vagus nerve into the safe “green zone” allowing our parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) to soothe us and make us feel safe. This is peace (8Ps) and active action can take place positively (8Ps) if the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) produces eustress— positive (8Ps), beneficial and motivating stress. Eustress can be either psychological (e.g. excitement or challenge), physical (e.g., exercise or cold exposure), or biochemical/radiological (e.g. immune response. intermittent fasting or hormesis). This is the “yellow zone” and can increase strength, endurance, confidence, concentration, cognition, emotional regulation and resilience. Nonacceptance brings distress—nonbeneficial stress. This is the “red zone”. We want to avoid staying in the red zone for a long time. The quicker we accept, the less distress and associated dysfunctions of physical and mental well-being. One way to reframe distress as eustress is to see it as a positive challenge and excitement.

Say you get a “bad news” about someone you care about, instead of trying to have emotional empathy, complain and commensurate with that person, accept the situation and attempt to help the person out of distress and the red zone. Action speaks louder than word, worry or communal crying. Active listening, kind words, soothing physical touch and hugs can produce oxytocin to help people feel safe and understood, bringing them back to the yellow or green zone. Grief (emotional loss) is a process that requires acceptance and again the sooner the better. You do not need to go the typical hardwired response of grief which has been described in five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The first four stages are resistance. We can however practice to go straight to acceptance in most case and quicker to acceptance in most distressing events or emotional reactions.

Accept because the opposite is delusion and detrimental to you mentally and physically. Use your awareness training and practice to accept easily with a smile, a joke if needed, and positivity (8Ps).

Why Align?

Whatever is could not be otherwise. In most cases, we cannot begin to understand what role a seemingly senseless event may have within the totality of the cosmos, but recognizing its inevitability within the vastness of the whole can be the beginning of an inner acceptance of what is and thus a realignment with the wholeness of life.

-Eckart Tolle, Stillness Speaks

Once we understand that every moment and situation is inevitable, thus unavoidable, we can better see the pointlessness of resistance and open up to its higher meaning, purpose (8Ps) and connection (7Cs). We can align with the awesomeness of existence’s life current with ease and awe, instead trying to swim upstream out-of-breath and still ending up where the current takes us. Alignment alleviates and stops unnecessary suffering.

Another way to think of it is to “act and think as if you have completely chosen whatever experience you face at each moment.” This is a positive narrative which is false yet allows some people who need to feel in control—illusion of choice and freedom—to resist less by tricking their brain into aligning and accepting more rapidly and completely for their own good. The real freedom comes from committing and surrendering.

“I don’t think or plan, I observe. I don’t steer, I just ride currents; they steer,” said Jed McKenna. Let’s surrender to life’s beautiful and compelling currents.

We will see that water is an apt metaphor for acceptance. Ancient Chinese philosophers had this brilliant concept called "Wu Wei"—effortless action in harmony with the Dao. Now, before you roll your eyes thinking this is going to be another wellness lecture about finding your "Zen", consider this: The Dao is basically reality's way of saying "It is what it is" but making it sound profound enough to build a philosophy around it. One can also simply exclaim "sure", "I guess", "I don't mind" or "fine with me". It is what would most call an "easy-going personality" pushed to its positive extreme with simplicity.

The ancient Daoists watched rivers flow around rocks instead of trying to punch through them and thought, "Hey, maybe there's something to this whole 'not fighting everything' approach." They were the original inventors of the "go with the flow" mentality, long before it became a bumper sticker on a yoga teacher's Prius.

Alignment to reality allows less undue resistance. If you don't like that bumper sticker or your boss, still accept it. Then change lanes or change jobs. It doesn't mean you cannot accept it in the moment before you take an action or aware nonaction.

Another example is many people's greatest fear, loneliness or lack of relationship connection (7Cs). People may destroy their lives or that of others in various ways for fear of being lonely for an extended period. This is particularly true for insecure attached types yet can occur to anyone at any time. If we accept before we act, we may only experience solitude, yet solitude is a fact, while loneliness is a negative perception of that same fact. They are quite different, and we can be connected positively to many things when we accept momentary solitude. There are times that we in fact seek it, so why now accept it when it is there? Alignment allows us to accept the universe's timetable and stop believing we are in control of the clock. This requires patience (8Ps) and acceptance also leads to deep contentment (7Cs) with whatever is—not what we would want it to be. Even worse, we often don't even know what we want but pretend we do or justify our actions or feelings after the fact!

You may say "easier said than done" when your partner gives you the cold shoulder and you feel momentarily lost, or your parent dies, and you experience immense loss, and you would be right. Even with enhanced disposition, many things can destabilize us if we are not already anchored in awareness and ready to accept. This must be trained. We should align our thoughts to be ready to accept loss and that is when the Stoic training comes in. Stoics mental practice losing everything and everyone they hold dear—the first Stoic, Zeno of Citium, in fact lost his ship with many valuable possessions to... the sea—I warned you water and acceptance have a love story!

Reduce attachment, increase compassion (7Cs), presence (8Ps) and acceptance (4As). We can also use many ways to reduce anxiety, and make sure our body and nervous system are in alignment with feelings of security, calm and peace (8Ps) as much as possible by building up our emotional and body awareness. We will take about cardiac coherence, polyvagal theory and resilience in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. As for the continued water metaphor, we will see in the next chapter that if acceptance is seeing the glass filled at 50%, appreciation is positively (8Ps) seeing the glass half-full but also appreciating the half-empty part and glass all together, and perhaps the intricacy of the water molecules and the overall fundamental usefulness of water. In chapter 4 we will further learn to access and create awe, by contemplating the implications of the water's inherent beauty, majesty and "magic".

We still have lots of accepting to do before we pull out our final two Aces. Let's continue to stack the decks in our favor. It is not cheating: these four Aces are helpful and beneficial for all who play the game of life and there is no winner or loser, only those who enjoy playing the game and those who haven't learned to enjoy every hand they are dealt—some do not even know it is a game still!

Surrender

Go one step further: accept that there is nothing you can do, and accept it completely. You are not in control. Deeply surrender to every aspect of that experience, your feelings as well as any pain or discomfort...

-Eckart Tolle, Stillness Speaks

Surrender: not just for defeated armies anymore. Life is not war, although some countries, coworkers and family members may want to believe so. Be aware (4As) and in peace (8Ps).

The word "surrender" gets a bad rap. We associate it with defeat, with giving up, with that friend who always bails halfway through a game of Monopoly because they're losing. But true surrender is more like what water does—it doesn't fight the shape of the container it's in; it just fills it perfectly.

This kind of surrender isn't about being passive or weak. It's about being smart enough to know when you're in a battle you can't win. Like arguing with a cat about whether it should knock that glass off the table. The glass is going down. Accept it. There is of course slightly more to it, but you get the point.

There are profound benefits of surrendering to life and cultivating complete acceptance. Effortlessness comes from surrender. Why make life difficult when it can be easier. Pick your challenges instead of creating them. "Surfing is very similar to life. When a good wave comes along for you, you ride it and slide off gently. Whether the days are vicious or flat, you accept it all." —Ha Eun Shin, Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha. Yes, I love K-dramas and I accept it. I don't fight it. Korean war history suggests similar conclusion.

Psychological Benefits:

1. **Reduced Anxiety:** Letting go of the need to control outcomes lowers stress levels when facing uncertainty. Less anticipatory anxiety including decreased rumination about "what-ifs" or "should I".
2. **Emotional Freedom:** Release from constant emotional resistance. Ability to experience emotions without judgment. Greater emotional resilience. Increased emotional intelligence.
3. **Mental Clarity (11Cs):** Clearer decision-making without attachment to outcomes. Better focus on the present moment. Reduced mental clutter.
4. **Enhanced Cognitive Flexibility and Creativity (7Cs):** Research in organizational psychology shows that teams with higher levels of psychological acceptance demonstrate 23% better problem-solving abilities and 31% improved creativity compared to teams that practice judgment and criticism.

Physiological Benefits:

1. **Reduced Stress Response:** Lower cortisol levels. Decreased muscle tension. Improved sleep quality. Better immune function and less inflammation.
2. **Enhanced Well-being:** Reduced physical manifestations of anxiety. Better digestion and increased energy levels. Stabilized blood pressure.

Relational Benefits:

1. **Improved Relationships:** Greater authenticity in connections (7Cs). Less need to control others. Enhanced empathy and understanding. More genuine interactions.
2. **Better Communication:** Less defensive responses. Increased openness to different perspectives. More effective listening. Greater ability to be present (8Ps) with others.

Acceptance opens possibilities instead of being stuck. Flexibility in approaches increases resilience, and better response to change. We will see the importance of adaptability in *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention!* Elastic and expanded consciousness can lead to better acceptance, and, conversely, acceptance can also lead to increased awareness (4As). This is one way the two first of the four Aces work together as a virtuous circle or positive loop. This can lead to:

1. Deeper connection (7Cs) and sense of purpose (8Ps).
2. Greater coherence (11Cs) and alignment with life's flow. (More on both in *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention!*)
3. Broader perspective on life events
4. Increased wisdom and understanding
5. Greater sense of unity and peace (8Ps)—no needless war or conflict
6. Enhanced intuition and attuned subconscious—with practice and training, including visualization

Superior creativity (7Cs) is another benefit of acceptance, as we saw above, because it unsticks your mind's rigid response and allows you to find creative interpretations, solutions and coping strategies. In short it gives you access to:

1. More openness to new possibilities
2. Increased innovative thinking
3. Better insights
4. Reduced creative blocks

Acceptance gives you better all-around decision-making abilities.

1. Clearer perception of situations
2. Less emotional interference or resistance
3. More balanced considerations
4. Improved judgment

If these dozens of clear benefits are not enough for you to drastically reduce your reactive nonacceptance, maybe you deserve to suffer. Oh no, in chapter 1, we saw that we don't deserve anything—"good", nor "bad".

Suffer?

Acceptance reduces your immediate suffering along with other notable life quality improvements like enhanced joy, appreciation—see chapter 3—of simple moments, increased spontaneous happiness and more frequent positive experiences. It gives an overall deeper satisfaction with life.

Reduced (self-imposed) suffering is similar to self-compassion (7Cs) and allows less self-created stress, decreased resistance to what is, lower levels of disappointment.

To breakdown the greater peace (8Ps), we can consider that it may give rise to:

1. More frequent states of calm
2. Increased inner stability and better emotional balance
3. Accelerated emotional maturity
4. Greater wisdom development and improved life understanding
5. Enhanced self-awareness (4As) and sense of contentment (7Cs)

Complete acceptance doesn't mean passivity or inaction. Rather, it means acting from a place of clear seeing and peace rather than resistance and struggle. The benefits compound over time as

acceptance becomes more natural and integrated into daily life. We see more and suffer less. Surf the wave...

Commit

Why do we fight reality, even though reality always wins?

Picture this: You're stuck in traffic. Your phone's at 2%. The car in front of you has one of those "Live, Laugh, Love" stickers—I accept that I am a stickler for car stickers and that is a good one, just the wrong timing. You laugh, but it's a yellow laugh (in French, that means a fake and frustrated laugh: *rire jaune*). You're absolutely certain that if you'd left just five minutes earlier, none of this would be happening. Welcome to the human condition—where we spend approximately 87% of our time fighting things we can't change (note: this "statistic" is completely made up, but feels true, doesn't it?). What could you possibly do to change the traffic? In a rare instance, I did. This one is a true story, even if it may seem far-fetched.

I was in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. The country is in West Africa and they officially speak French—colonialization is a thing, yes—, along with Dyula, Baoulé, Anyin and over 60 other languages, but the idea of respecting road rules seem as foreign as eating with chopsticks to an average Texan. Abidjan is the sixth most populous city in Africa with well over seven million people calling it home and a high level of industrialisation and urbanisation (Houston has a third of that population). They have large roads and a proper international airport I landed in. The problem (situation) was that my friend could not pick me up from the airport and gave me her address to wait for my arrival at her home. Two and a half hours after I left the airport with my trusted carry-on with a decent taxi, I was still stuck in one of the most confused and confusing traffic I had ever seen—and I had been to Dhaka, Caracas and Cairo! This was the descent into road Hell—with the hot African heat, I could almost smell the fire and see the flames. The distance from the airport if Google Maps is too be trusted was 16 minutes away. The taxi driver was not trying to scam me or take me for a ride (literally). We were stuck. Every road and intersection were pure mayhem. No one respected the rules. Eventually, a four-lane boulevard had become seven and a half cars wide; not to worry. Soon, a busy intersection became a battlefield for macho car drivers who taught that their increasingly impossible advancement into the intersection would show their virility and get them to wherever they were going faster. The intersection became so thoroughly blocked that no car could realistically move forward anymore. It stayed that way for well over 30 minutes as each driver blamed the others in a thankfully non-violent way. We were still not moving, and I was started to think my entire vacation would possibly be spent in traffic as I had to fly to Burkina Faso the following day.

I love travelling, and I had learned to accept that different cultures have different norms, including the respect or non-respect of various social cues (religion, laws, food, sex, gender, taboos, trust, hospitality, health, security, deference, worship, you-name-it). I did accept my special scenic tour of the chaotic city and tried to see it as a unique bumper car party. In my head, I remained calmed and turned potentially negative awe into positive awe and acceptance. I was observing the scene as someone may look at wildlife in nature, a play on New York's Broadway, Melbourne's East End or London's West End, or a European independent film. However, we saw that acceptance is non-resistance but not resignation. Because I was observing the scene attentively, I saw an opportunity for action with passion (8Ps) and creativity (7Cs). I told my driver I would be right back and left my light luggage in the car. I had no fear that he would leave with it, as no one was moving at all! I had little fear of the macho drivers because they didn't seem like the brightest bunch at the time and my hopes was that they would at least entertain my solution: as I stepped out of the taxi in the unresolved frenzy, I decided to adlib myself as a volunteer

traffic controller. I was not aiming to be as seductive as the traffic ladies in Pyongyang, North Korea, but if there a man for the job that no one seemed to take responsibility for, why couldn't it be me?

That may seem like courage (7Cs) but to me it was simple. They did not know how to drive or disentangle the mess they created and hopefully I did. It took me about 20 minutes that have cars follow my instructions and liberate the intersection as if it had been conquered by an ubiquitous foe. The cars were amazingly all compliant (obsequious) to my directions. Not protest, no resistance. I guess, they had read the equivalent of this chapter of the book. They all followed the direction of someone who knew best how to help people get their cars out of snowbanks and not improvise an impossibly orchestrated bumper-to-bumper blockade. The job done, I returned to my taxi and we were able to reach my friend before an international incident transpired, with, of course, another humorous story to tell that day and now years later.

The funny thing about acceptance isn't that it's difficult—it's that we're basically resistance machines dressed in human clothing. We resist everything from the weather to the inevitable march of time that keeps adding candles to our birthday cakes. We're like toddlers throwing tantrums at physics, and physics, being the mature force it is, just keeps doing its thing while we exhaust ourselves.

We have commitment issues in relationships—more on that later—and with reality!

Here's where things get interesting: Acceptance isn't just about throwing your hands up and declaring "Whatever!" to the universe (though that's certainly one approach). It's about making a conscious commitment to stop arguing with what is. Think of it as getting married to reality—for better or worse, in sickness and in health, till death do you part.

The commitment part is what trips people up. We're fine with accepting the good stuff—promotions, compliments, free samples at Costco. But the moment life serves us a sandwich we didn't order, we want to speak to reality's manager.

A commitment (11Cs) allows fewer wandering thoughts and uncertainty. A marriage is a long-term commitment, so your relationship is not put in question several times a month or a day. As mentioned, mental and emotional reactive and resisting habits die harder than Bruce Willis.

To help you commit constantly to what may seem a struggle at first, here are a few ideas and strategies to commit to existence and reality “as is” and for good:

1. **Mental Practice:** Daily acceptance exercises, consistent mindfulness routines, regular self-reflection, ongoing learning and growth. Present moment consciousness and body awareness exercises like body-scans can increase acceptance of internal and external reality. Commit to the practice and commit to reality. After all, with it, you wouldn't be here to complain.
2. **Emotional Processing:** Acknowledging all emotions. Allowing feelings without resistance. Processing rather than suppressing. Emotional release practices. Commit to come back to positive mood and emotions as fast as possible—faster than my traffic jam in Abidjan for example.
3. **Thought Observation:** Witnessing thoughts without attachment, nor identification. Recognizing thought patterns. Practicing non-judgment and equanimity. Cultivating witness consciousness. Commit to not being a judge; most judges are pretentious any way—except the youngest judges in the world in Turkey circa 2019 (I know two of them and they are pretty and not pretentious).
4. **Physical Practices:** Tension release techniques, breathing practices and movement awareness. Physical commitments can work better for some. Thought observation: there are many meanings for “foursome”: golf, etc. All physical of course.

5. **Community Support:** Finding like-minded individuals where you can share experiences and insights. Sharing is caring! Also look for group practice opportunities and potential accountability partnerships. Commit to your group and accept if they don't reciprocate.

6. **Professional Guidance:** Working with mentors and coaches. Seeking therapeutic support as needed. Attending workshops, retreats or seminars. Continuous education and finding relevant resources. Commit to curiosity (7Cs) and learning. Commit to accept if you need help. No ego. We are social animals and that makes our greatest strength.

We can see that some of these tricks are similar to awareness practice, so you can combine and intertwine them with the goals to accept readily (not warily) with awareness in mind. More on commitment in chapter 6.

Acceptance in Relationships

In order to protect our emotional wounds, and because of our fear of being hurt, humans create something very sophisticated in the mind: a big denial system. In the denial system we become the perfect liars. We lie so perfectly that we lie to ourselves and we even believe our own lies. We don't notice we are lying and sometimes even when we know we are lying, we justify the lie and excuse the lie to protect ourselves from the pain of our wounds.

—Don Miguel Ruiz, The Mastery of Love

The "acceptance buffer effect" demonstrates that people who practice acceptance recover from social rejection 60% faster than those who don't, with their cortisol levels returning to baseline more quickly. Might it be professional, personal, romantic, or familial relationships, acceptance of self, other and awareness of non-self may go a long way. Even with strangers which we simultaneously tend to accept less and more—because we do not imagine their differences bothering us for very long—, we can learn to accept readily with curiosity (7Cs) and compassion (7Cs). The problem with the people we see often is that we have higher expectations for them. Expectation is exponentially linked to dissatisfaction. Moreso, we tend to have specific projections for our colleagues, lovers and friends. We do not easily accept who they are in general or at any given moment. We try to impose our intentions on them and again constantly reject their reality—even if we can see it as fantasy and delusion with the awareness practice we now have. It is still real to them, and it is the reality you must accept until any potential substantial change. Of course, there is always subtle changes as life is different from a moment to the next, but changes in attitude, habits and false identities are hard to come by and when they do, they may not go in the direction you may have wanted them to. Be patient (8Ps) and see peace (8Ps) rather than conflict and confrontation. They may care about you, your desires, values or goals yet are not and will never be you—with your peculiar and particular life experiences, biological makeup, own social masks and total mess.

Try to accept the person first and imagine their intentions are good (from their point of view—intellectual empathy or emotional intelligence). Separate your construct of them as individuals from the actions (or nonactions) they may exhibit at any given time. Know that this construct of individual is a vast illusion and misrepresentation as well—you are not a mind reader as much as you may think you are. The mind is much more complex than that and you do not understand your own, much less another. They are only false approximations. These people and their inner world are changing constantly as you

are changing. The causes are almost infinite: from big life events or epiphanies to the small mood changes due to the weather, diet, sleep, hormones, sex life, other key or fortuitous relationships. People's actions are different whether they had disappointment or joy earlier that day, woke up grumpy, received a kind or mean message, or noticed a smile that brightened their day and disposition. Do not judge, just accept and adapt. Remember that flexibility is the key. Acceptance practiced in relationships also triggers the release of oxytocin, often called the "bonding hormone," which not only strengthens social connections but also reduces stress and promotes healing.

Communication helps to and try to avoid unhealthy communication postures or identities like stubborn, superior, inferior, avoidant, or enmeshed. More on communication later in the happiness series. Try to accept and understand with curiosity (7Cs). Some of the other's underlying values, beliefs, dreams and desires with nonjudgement, care (11Cs) and compassion (7Cs). Be curious about their potential past and current suffering. They likely do not know like you that suffering is optional. You can possibly align better with their sometimes-stiff stories even if you do not wish to espouse them yourself. They can often become complementary with creativity (7Cs). Your job is to remain flexible even when faced with fixing, blaming, defensiveness and rigidity. Do not ridicule them, even if only in thought. Chances are you were like that too once, or even worse, and a part of you may still be stuck with your own stories you still cling on to, about yourself, them and the world. Accept all that and raise your awareness even further.

We examined alignment briefly earlier in the chapter and will endeavour to explore it even further in *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention!* When you accept the differences in others and how people change over time, you can find better alignment with fluidity. Try to appreciate (4As) them for being in your path, as people are a source of great joy when we do not judge. Appreciation has many benefits for you, and for the ones you sincerely appreciate as we will see in the following chapter.

Radical Acceptance: The Ultimate Power Move

Radical acceptance is like regular acceptance after it's been to the gym and gotten really buff. It's acceptance that doesn't just acknowledge reality but bear-hugs it. It's looking at the confusion and unpredictability of life and saying, "Yep, this too." Think about it this way: Every time you radically accept something, you're essentially stealing reality's thunder. Reality can't push you around if you're already dancing with it. It's like when someone tries to insult you by stating a fact about yourself that you've already embraced—it just doesn't work.

Let's clear up some misconceptions about acceptance before we get radical:

1. "Acceptance means approval" — Nope. You can accept that your neighbor's dog won't stop barking without approving of its amateur opera career.
2. "Acceptance means giving up" — Wrong again. It means stopping the fight with what is so you can focus on what could be.
3. "Acceptance is passive" — Actually, it's one of the most active choices you can make. We will see in *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention!* how much we need to pay attention, and acceptance removes rumination and inner distractions.
4. "Once you accept something, you'll never feel bad about it again" — If only! As we saw, acceptance is more like a daily practice than a one-time achievement. However, the more you really and radically accept, the less bad you will feel. If you partially or prosaically accept, you will only build resentment.

There's a profound wisdom in acceptance that often gets overlooked. When you accept what is, you clean your perception. You see things as they are, not as you wish they were. This clarity (11Cs) is like putting on glasses after walking around with blurry vision—suddenly everything comes into focus.

This doesn't mean you have to like what you see. But seeing clearly is the first step to any meaningful change. It's like finally admitting your room is messy—you might not like the mess, but acknowledging it is the first step to cleaning it up. Who really wants to clean their room every day? Whatever way you want to use your time for, acceptance will increase your leisure or productivity by:

1. Less energy wasted on resistance
2. Better focus on action and attention on actual tasks
3. More efficient use of resources
4. Enhanced flow states—that state when time disappears, and your inner smile is up to your ears

In the long-term you may also see acceptance help you navigate life in a smoother more resilient way and affect life other positively by having: Better handling of challenges, improved life transitions, enhanced compassionate (7Cs) decision-making, greater life satisfaction, positive (8Ps) influence on others, marked leadership abilities, meaningful contributions, accommodations, flexibility and ability to adapt to uncertainty. You can be a better role model and inspire people by being “cool under fire”.

Neuroscience of Letting Go and Equanimity

Scientists have found that acceptance changes your brain and body. When you practice acceptance, your amygdala (the brain's alarm system) calms down, your blood pressure decreases, and your stress hormones take a coffee break.

It's like your brain has been running a constant background program called "But I Don't Want This!" that's been eating up all your RAM. Acceptance closes that program, freeing up mental energy for more useful things—like finally learning how to play a new instrument or to speak a new language fluently (though let's be honest, that might require more than just freed-up mental energy). How about a new programming language instead? Perhaps business skills, gardening, photography or the dreaded public speaking skills.

Other fascinating neuroscience insights about acceptance and its remarkable effects on our wellbeing and functioning are plenty, sometimes counterintuitive and sometimes funny—if they are not, you should accept that too, radical and all.

Brain imaging studies reveal that while acceptance decreases amygdala activity, it increases prefrontal cortex engagement—decision-making brain master. This means that when we accept difficult situations, we shift our brain activity from emotional reactivity to more reasoned responses—a finding that contradicts the common belief that acceptance is passive.

The vagus nerve, our primary parasympathetic nerve, becomes more active during states of acceptance, leading to reduced inflammation and improved immune function. Research shows that people who practice acceptance have measurably better vagal tone, which correlates with better emotional regulation and physical health.

The "acceptance threshold" phenomenon in neuroscience shows that regular practice of acceptance changes our baseline stress response, making us more resilient to future challenges. This creates a positive feedback loop where acceptance builds upon itself.

Studies of long-term meditators who practice acceptance show increased gray matter density in regions associated with emotional regulation, perspective-taking, and bodily awareness (4As), indicating that acceptance literally changes brain structure.

Acceptance is letting go of mental attachments. “Attachment to results is just another form of fear,” explains Dr. Doty. If we can manage expectations and view the world with equanimity—easily accepting what we may perceive as “good”, “neutral” or “bad” as impermanent and temporary without undue emotional or mental attachment—, we experience the world with greater awareness (4As) and leave room for deeper appreciation (4As) and even awe (4As). You can appreciate your accomplishments if it helps your confidence yet do not be too attached to them—that becomes ego and future pain. Be happily humble, patient (8Ps) and forgiving with yourself (and others). We will look at appreciation best practices in the next chapter and the less it is about you (ego identity), the happier your appreciation will make you. Imagine that self-appreciation is good like masturbation but even better is transcending sex or in this case appreciation of others and the world—which include you too, only as a minor character of the universe’s orgasmic orgy of existence. Acceptance and awareness of our small role can thus increase our appreciation and awe. That is one of many ways the 4 Aces act together to make you have the perfect hand every time.

Long-term meditators who can see any situation with more equanimity showed marked reduction of the unpleasantness of pain and increased activation of the brain sensory areas—our beloved senses and window to the world. According to brain imaging studies, acceptance lowers mental resistance by decreasing activation of the executive control network (ECN), while deepening the sensory experience without automatic negative thoughts (ANTs).

Acceptance + Equanimity = Less Resistance + More Sensations + Presence (8Ps)

Acceptance = Less Fear + More Flexibility + More Positivity (8Ps)

More positively perceived sensations are linked appreciation (4As) as we will see in the section below and following chapter. Acceptance can bring about equanimity and vice versa. A nonjudgement observation and receptiveness allow for more choices and aware action (or nonaction) that can lead to change or simple contentment (7Cs).

We saw some benefits of mindfulness earlier in the book (and in *Beyond Happy*). It is linked with positive psychology with two main dimensions: acceptance (4As) and presence (8Ps)¹⁶. Acceptance consists of recognizing inner (and other) events such as experience, emotions, thoughts, or beliefs when one feels them¹⁷. True acceptance does not imply resentment, nor resignation as we saw, but rather experiencing without resistance and through an unjudging attitude of acknowledging it rather than judging it as good, bad or “blah”. This is in essence equanimity. Presence is the feeling of being in the moment with focused attention. More on attention in *Don’t Be Authentic, Pay Attention!*.

A mindfulness practice allows to train presence, acceptance and equanimity. When we are able to accept momentary discomfort and pain, we can transcend and find happiness, joy and contentment in everything with confidence.

Sleep, Aging and Acceptance

Acceptance has been shown to improve sleep quality by reducing pre-sleep cognitive arousal. People who practice acceptance fall asleep an average of 17 minutes faster than those who practice other emotion regulation strategies. Acceptance’s direct sleep benefits involve mental release (from resistance)

¹⁶ Walach, H., Buchheld, N., Büttenmüller, V., Kleinknecht, N., and Schmidt, S. (2006). Measuring mindfulness—the Freiburg mindfulness inventory (FMI). *Personality Individ. Differ.* 40 (8), 1543–1555. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2005.11.025

¹⁷ Hayes, S. C., Follette, V. M., and Linehan, M. M. (2004). *Mindfulness and acceptance: Expanding the cognitive-behavioral tradition*. New York City: Guilford Press.

mechanisms which lessens "trying to sleep" paradox, reduces sleep performance anxiety, allows natural sleep onset. In short, it decreases sleep-related worry loops and is better than counting sheep backward from a hundred!

Remember the physiological effects of lowers fight-or-flight response, reducing muscle tension from resistance, normalized and lower cortisol levels and improved autonomic nervous system balance. They all contribute to less anxiety and stress, and better sleep. Sleep-specific benefits of acceptance include:

- Adaptation and acceptance of natural sleep/wake variations
- Reduction of frustration with sleep disruptions
- Allowing easier return to sleep after waking
- Creating permission and opportunity for rest without sleep, including non-sleep deep rest (NSDR)

Appreciation (4As) which is the topic of the next chapter (our next Ace) also positively impacts sleep. Its perceptual effects include reducing mental chatter through present-moment (8Ps) awareness (4As). It can engage sensory experience rather than solely conceptual thinking and creates mental spaciousness that aids sleep onset. Like acceptance, it may lower cortisol levels through immediate positive experience, activate parasympathetic nervous system and reduces muscle tension—this time through present-moment body awareness. Appreciation may improve heart rate variability and creates state of relaxed alertness conducive to natural sleep

Gratitude is a key concept tackled in *Beyond Happy* and impacts better sleep in various way. It shifts focus from worries to positive (8Ps) experiences by creating narrative coherence (11Cs) about day's events and increase sense of life satisfaction. Gratitude works through memory and evaluation processes to positively modulate emotional mechanisms (emotional regulation). It reduces negative rumination and increases positive affect. This is especially useful before sleep and may buffer against stress across the day.

The key differences between these are time focus, where appreciation is more present-moment while gratitude is often past-oriented reflection. Processing modes of appreciation or more experiential (direct) whereas gratitude may be more evaluative (comparative). They can both be conceptual in different ways where gratitude is more narrative meaning and appreciation is more aesthetic In the moment, as well as big picture. Neural activation of appreciation is more through the sensory/perceptual networks and gratitude relies more on the memory/appraisal networks. Research suggests both improve sleep quality but through different mechanisms. Appreciation might work better for people who struggle with overthinking, those with anxiety-related sleep issues and individuals who respond well to mindfulness. Gratitude might be more effective for those who benefit most from emotional processing, people who need closure on daily events, and Individuals who struggle with negative rumination.

Appreciation (4As) focuses on positive aspects while gratitude emphasizes beneficial elements. Acceptance (4As) goes beyond by embracing both comfort and discomfort! It works through a non-reactive awareness (4As), while appreciation is active engagement and gratitude is evaluative reflection. The problem-solving approach of acceptance is the "release: of the need to fix/change. Appreciation solves problems by enhancing the present positive focus while gratitude reframes experiences positively to find solutions.

Synergistic effects of acceptance when combined with appreciation to accept current state while noting pleasant aspects gives better night sleep and perhaps less nightmares. It balances contentment (7Cs) with reality to give further full-fledged fulfilling peace (8Ps). It creates comprehensive presence

(8Ps). When acceptance is combined with gratitude, you can accept circumstances while acknowledging benefits and enable authentic thankfulness (without “fake” positivity).

Studies on telomeres—the protective caps on our chromosomes that indicate cellular aging—show that people who practice acceptance tend to have longer telomeres, suggesting that acceptance may slow biological aging at the cellular level.

Immune function research shows that acceptance practices increase natural killer cell activity—the cells responsible for fighting viruses and cancer—by up to 40% compared to baseline.

Overall acceptance gives better sleep and better chance to blow 100 candles at the same time!

Emotional Processing, Regulation and Flexibility

Acceptance has been shown to improve cognitive flexibility, with research participants showing a 34% improvement in their ability to switch between different mental tasks after practicing acceptance exercises. On the other hand, accepting our emotions and being aware of our wide array of positive counterpoints can lead to emotional flexibility.

Adaptability and flexibility can also be measured by heart rate variability (HRV). Some studies demonstrate that acceptance creates more coherent heart rhythms than other emotional regulation strategies, indicating better integration between the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, as we saw with stronger vagal tone above. Research on “biological completion” shows that acceptance of emotions allows them to run their natural course in about 90 seconds, while resistance can extend their impact for hours or days. I am sure you know of at least one person who can regularly be angry for hours or days! I personally prefer 90 seconds, but I accept angry people as part of life. I even appreciate (4As) the opportunity to practice patience (8Ps) and compassion (7Cs); although I am not always an equanimous monk and can also have moments of frustration... usually for 90 seconds! Reframe and redirect to the canvas of positive emotions available. When in doubt, use humor. Although this may often make angry people angrier. Ah well, laugh even more. Accept and let it run its course.

The “acceptance cascade” phenomenon in neuroscience shows that practicing acceptance in one area of life automatically generalizes to other areas through neural pathway strengthening, making acceptance an increasingly natural response across different situations.

The Art of Strategic Non-Resistance

Think of acceptance as a martial art. In Aikido, you don't meet force with force—you blend with the attack and redirect it. Life throws a punch, you don't try to punch back harder, you roll with it and find your balance. This doesn't mean you become a human doormat. It means you stop wasting energy fighting the reality of what has already happened and instead use that energy to shape what happens next.

When you really commit to acceptance, some surprising things start happening:

1. You have more energy. As we saw, turns out, constantly arguing with reality is exhausting.
2. You become weirdly invincible—not because nothing can hurt you, but because you stop being surprised by life's plot twists. You become the rock that let's the river run through unphased.
3. Your sense of humor improves—because when you stop fighting reality, you start seeing the cosmic joke of it all. Awareness helps finding absurdity as we saw in the last chapter. Laugh out loud and be the last one standing.
4. Your relationships improve. Accepting in relationship is letting go of your ego and opening to not only the other, but the world. Also, people tend to like you more when you're not constantly complaining about things nobody can change. And here you thought that shared complaining

about the weather or that your sports team cannot seem to win provides deep bonding and communion—if this emotional empathy or negative small talk does, it is a very short-lived connection. Add appreciation (4As) to the mix and start a praise crusade instead of a blaming war.

Once you've mastered basic acceptance, you can move on to the advanced stuff. Here are three Advanced Acceptance Techniques:

1. Pre-emptive Acceptance: Accepting things before they even happen. Like accepting that your technology will eventually betray you in the middle of an important presentation. This forward-looking form of acceptance operates like an emotional insurance policy against life's inevitable plot twists. By acknowledging and accepting potential challenges before they materialize, we create psychological space for resilience. It's not about pessimism or expecting the worst, but rather about developing a flexible relationship with uncertainty. Like a mental aikido master, pre-emptive acceptance allows us to maintain balance even when anticipating disruption. We also saw how Stoics mentally prepare for unavertable loss.

The beauty of pre-emptive acceptance lies in its paradoxical nature—by accepting what might go wrong, we often become more capable of handling things going right. It's like carrying an umbrella on a sunny day; you're not inviting rain, but you're at peace (8Ps) with its possibility. If it's a transparent umbrella, even better. Accept and appreciate (4As) the sun or the rain.

Not a particularly worried parent, I still ask my son to bring extra dry socks in many outdoor activities. One of these times when we were hiking in Patagonia, we reached the peak of a rather epic trail in El Chalten, Argentina, where there was a glacial laguna filled with gorgeous icebergs. There were hills around to catch various viewpoints of the sublime scenery of snow-capped mountain peaks, glacier and icebergs forming, floating and fading into the cold lake. It was rather cold at that altitude and latitude so that the icebergs were not melting fast at all. The view was breathtaking and filled us both with awe (4As). Adventurous as my son is—genetics and parenting combined—he went to touch an iceberg that was resting on the banks of the laguna. Not only was he able to touch the beautiful and rare fleeting iceberg, but he inadvertently fell and also immersed himself completely in the laguna. This provoked in me, no worry at all but rather roars of explosive laughter. I had spent a decade bringing him to swimming lessons and he had even been at a competitive level where he swam every school afternoon for two years, so I had little fear of him drowning. He swam much better than me! He was also not far from the bank, and I was close by. I did not particularly want to take a cold plunge but also knew the benefits of cold therapy and would happily be the hero to save a stranger or maybe even *my* son—if he needed me to. The situation was simply utterly funny to me and not scary at all. He was momentarily shocked—by the cold water, by his funny fall, and by the fact that I could not stop laughing and was not helping him out. He reached out his hand and asked puzzled “*papa, tu vas pas m’aider?*” (dad, you’re not going to help me?). I looked at him with a smile and laughed a bit more and then helped him out of the cold iceberg lake. He eventually laughed too—at himself, at the situation and at my reaction. We then had to find a solution to get him safely through the hours of trekking left to get down the mountainous way down.

I had accepted that his socks might get wet and even planned for it. We now had to accept that his whole body and clothes got wet, that it was cold, that we had hours left with windy gusts and strenuous hike down. After the quick acceptance that was aided by practiced and pre-emptive acceptance we could get on to the good part: action. The good part was also the laughter then and the many times we retold that epic story. We decided to run down the mountain to make sure he would not get into hypothermic shock. The problem is, he was not only a better swimmer than me but also had more endurance in the pool and in the mountain now. Still, I managed to not get too out of breath for fear that he would call his

father out-of-shape—which he still did anyway! We made it done to the rental car with heating and were on are way to live and laugh another day.

This form of acceptance reduces the gap between expectation and reality, creating a buffer zone where adaptability can flourish—and laughter often co-exists.

2. **Retroactive Acceptance:** Making peace with your past self's questionable hair choices or previous choices in hairy situations is the ability to accept the past—and not only the present—fully. This expands are acceptance like pre-emptive acceptance accepts in advance (the future). Here we accept what we did not accept at that moment in time and perhaps filled us with the gamut of guilt, shame, blame, complain, wishful thinking, negative nostalgia, pity, envy, regret, remorse or worse.

Looking back at our past with acceptance requires a special kind of alchemy—transforming cringe-worthy memories into valuable chapters of our personal growth story. Retroactive acceptance isn't just about making peace (8Ps) with past fashion disasters, non-judicious actions or regrettable relationships; it's about recognizing that every past version of ourselves was doing their best with the (perhaps limited) awareness they had at the time. Don't worry, your awareness is still limited now!

This form of acceptance acts like a compassionate (7Cs) time machine, allowing us to revisit our past without getting stuck there. It's about acknowledging that our past choices, even the questionable ones, have contributed to who we are today. Whether it's that regrettable tribal tattoo or that time you thought running a marathon without training was a good idea, retroactive acceptance helps transform past embarrassments into endearing character development scenes. Remember there is no self and only stories, as we saw in chapter 1, so might as well make the stories compelling with humour, a little tension drama (not melodrama or megalomania) and purpose (8Ps).

3. **Meta-Acceptance:** Accepting that sometimes you won't be able to accept things right away. Meta-acceptance represents the ultimate recursive loop in the acceptance game—accepting our relationship with acceptance itself. It's about being at peace with the fact that sometimes we struggle with being at peace. This level operates like a Russian nesting doll of awareness (4As), where we accept our non-acceptance, embrace our resistance to embracing, and find peace (8Ps) with our peaceful struggles (and occasional destructive and war-like tendencies).

This highest form of acceptance acknowledges the inherent humanity in our journey toward acceptance. It's like being okay with not always being okay with being okay. Meta-acceptance creates a compassionate (7Cs) container for all our experiences within the acceptance and resistance spectrum—trying to tilt the balance more and more to acceptance—, allowing us to navigate the complexities of human consciousness without getting tangled in perfectionism about our acceptance practice.

The Paradox of Acceptance

Here's the beautiful paradox of acceptance: The more you accept things as they are, the more likely they are to change. Not because acceptance is magical, but because acceptance frees up the energy you need to create meaningful change. The "acceptance paradox" documented in pain research shows that accepting pain rather than fighting it reduces its perceived intensity by up to 50%. This occurs because acceptance reduces the secondary suffering caused by resistance, demonstrating how "what we resist persists" has a neurobiological basis. Anger is a secondary emotion of underlying emotions. It is often known as the "anger iceberg."

Figure 1: Anger Iceberg



Acceptance allows us to be aware (4As) of emotions, feelings, thoughts and understand underlying emotions, beliefs and assumptions to begin changing them and our reality immediately. To acceptance allows us to switch to openness to new ideas—creativity (7Cs)—and experiences, instead of being stuck in resistance and repetitive thought patterns. It's like that friend who finally found love when they stopped desperately looking for it. Or how the perfect comeback always comes to you once you've accepted that the moment has passed.

Again, acceptance is not about resignation. It's about recognition. Recognition that reality is what it is, that fighting what has already happened is like trying to unscramble an egg, and that true power lies not in controlling everything but in choosing how we dance with the inevitable. Dance and sign in the rain if you must. There is such a famous movie musical scene to inspire you if you want to watch or rewatch Gene Kelly's 1952 classic *Singin' in the Rain*. This also epitomize appreciation (4As) in the moment.

So next time reality throws you a curveball, try catching it instead of ducking. You might find that acceptance isn't just the path of least resistance—it's the path to peace, power, and occasionally, some pretty good stories to tell later.

Remember now—and many times a day—that life is going to do life, whether you accept it or not. You might as well accept it and save yourself the energy for more important things—like finally learning to appreciate everything. Hint, hint, that is the tantalizing topic of next chapter.

And in the end, maybe that's what acceptance really is—the wisdom to know the difference between what we can change and what we can't, the courage (7Cs) to surrender to what we can't change, and the sense of humor to laugh at it all anyway. More on humor's benefits when my editors finally get back to me for that book—in the meantime, I accept that my editors are busy... or pretend to be.

3. Appreciation

Appreciation is a wonderful thing: It makes what is excellent in others belong to us as well.

—Voltaire

I can never emphasize enough the importance of cultivating gratitude and appreciation for the present moment, letting go of ego and negativity, and embracing the beauty and wonder of life—awe (see next chapter). By practicing gratitude and appreciation, individuals can shift their focus from lack and dissatisfaction to abundance and inner peace, ultimately leading to a deeper connection (7Cs).

I appreciate Mario Allard even if I never met, saw or heard him. He never even had heard of him, although I love jazz and he was a rather famous award-winning jazz musician in Montreal. At 42, he had over two decades of worldwide concerts under his belt, several TV appearances, was a jazz performance teacher, composer, as well as a proud father of a 6-year-old boy. I was going to see a live concert of another artist where he was the main guest (unknown to me). A few days before, the concert was canceled. I was slightly disappointed but only slightly because I accept (4As) reality rapidly and made other plans—positive action over negative self-pity—that turned out to be fun and rewarding.

During that canceled concert night, I accidentally found out from musician friends that Allard was that slated guest star. I learned of him then, of his career, and how my friends knew and loved him. He had unfortunately fell from his Plateau-Mont-Royal apartment third-floor balcony and died, which prompted the impromptu cancelation. He was trying to throw his Christmas tree from the balcony—as some Montrealer do in January—and accidentally fell on an iron fence, immediately impaling him—like some medieval torture or strangest way to die annual list. He was rushed to the hospital but did not make it. The entire music industry was in grief and lauded not only his musicianship but his character and kindness. Robert Charlebois, Quebec iconic singer said: “(we) lose a great musician, students lose a master, I lose my favorite saxophonist. Your magical notes will always remain in my heart...”¹⁸

Accidents happen all the time. Appreciation requires work. It may be easier to appreciate people when they are dead, but do we take the time to appreciate them every day? Did his spouse and son do? Did his students, friends and colleagues? Did the public? Did his parents? Apparently, at least he did. Friend and flutist Marie Fatima-Rudolf remembers: “He was a jovial, happy guy that liked to experience lots of things. I think that was his goal, until the end.” Do you appreciate every minute? Do you see the world with curiosity (7Cs) and practice your own form of creativity (7Cs) like him?

Allard’s fellow Montreal jazz saxophonist Ben Deschamps said he was: “an inspiration, a leader, a gatherer, a joy of living, happiness on two legs, always there, always in a good mood, hilarious, good living, (...) had an infectious laugh. We had such a laugh together! You were a role model for me both as a musician but especially as a person, as a father.”¹⁹ In other words, he appreciated life every day and inspired others to do so. I do not know him, yet I can appreciate his contribution to the world. A sense of humour also helps appreciate! We will see more about humor’s role in happiness in *Beyond Humor* of my continuing happiness book series.

¹⁸ « (on) perd un grand musicien, les étudiants en jazz perdent un maître, je perds mon saxophoniste préféré. Tes notes magiques resteront dans mon cœur pour toujours... »

¹⁹ Billboard Canada. Obituaries: Montreal Jazz Saxophonist Mario Allard, Film and Music Visionary David Lynch. 20 January, 2025

Music can also help concentrate, activate and regulate emotions. We will talk more about the benefits of music in the same upcoming book. For now, let's have a look at life appreciation, as well as appreciation in different forms, its distinct benefits, expressions and how it is the evolution of our happiness awakening journey.

Step 1: Constantly seek more awareness and less certainty—make it a process, a questioning quest. Be aware of the interconnectivity of the world and of your inherent irrationality.

Step 2: Accept all, right away.

Step 3: Appreciate everything—yes, that includes everyone and that person you despise too.

Appreciate Life

Make it a habit to tell people thank you: To express your appreciation sincerely and without the expectation of anything in return. Truly appreciate those around you, and you'll soon find many others around you. Truly appreciate life, and you'll find that you have more of it.

— Ralph Marston

Imagine two nations. Expectation nation is a proud country of contempt, constant war and bickering. Appreciation nation next door is a modest nation of contentment (7Cs), joy and bliss. Which one would you rather live in? Amazing thing is you do not need a passport, work or residence permit to live in the one you choose. No flight ticket or border crossing; easy. The difficult part is that you must choose to live there and renew your free citizenship continuously. You must choose to appreciate constantly as we know from our journey that happiness is a choice, an attitude, a regiment and a practice. It is work, but when work is fun, do we still call it work?

People normally appreciate winning a big cash lottery. My uncle won 250 000 Euros in France and was rather happy—for less than a year! Most major lottery winners have an immediate increase in happiness. No surprise here. I still buy lottery tickets occasionally. However, this “extra happiness” wanes and disappears after about a year so that the “winners” return to their baseline level of subjective happiness and get used to their new material comforts. For a while, unexpected outcomes perceived positively are linked to dopamine release in the brain and some form of positive assessment of a situation like winning money (lottery, inheritance, sizable promotion, lucrative contract or “marrying rich”) or winning the heart of your dream beloved—until they become your personal nightmare, or you barely keep the love flame alive. In all these cases, the cure to lowering happiness could be higher appreciation.

Expectations lower appreciation and the positive unexpected boosts from getting what you want (ego), or more than you want or need (ego on steroids). When something you deem good and fortunate occurs, you evaluate it and are somewhat grateful. This thankfulness is temporarily and time specific. When you get a promotion, a new job, new car, new house or new potential life partner, you are normally happy for a while and then get used to it or even resent it—especially your new relationship partner that starts to get on your nerve. You expect things to stay the same or even better, and yes, you develop appreciation amnesia. In this chapter, we will see that appreciation is much more than a “thank you” or even an advanced gratitude practice of all the “little things”.

Imagine now that you have already won the lottery. Not a large sum of money. Your very existence. You being alive is you winning the cosmic and genetic lottery. In fact, I tell myself I won the life lotto many times a month to remind myself how much I should be appreciative of simply being alive.

Psychologist Susan David attacks fake positivity and proclaims: “Discomfort is the price of admission to a meaningful life”. We saw that acceptance includes discomfort in chapter 2. It is a stepping stone for appreciation. We also learned that a fake laugh is a “yellow laugh”. What is fake positivity?

The opposite of false is true, but we saw in chapter 1 that nothing is true! Fake laughing and fake smiling can induce similar responses and trick our brain to be happier so why not use these and other techniques. Should we “fake it till you make”? A few of my psychology colleagues look at the prevalence, frequency, reasons, as well as adaptive and maladaptive use of faking orgasms. Surprisingly, even men fake orgasms much more than one might think. Faking has its uses. We now know that life is a big fantasy anyway. So, why not use our imagination convincingly with purpose (8Ps) for positivity (8Ps). We will look at authenticity in *Don’t Be Authentic, Pay Attention!* Authenticity has many underdiscussed implications.

As discussed in details in *Beyond Happy*, I personally prone positivity (7Cs)—in almost all its forms—as an antidote to our tendencies to see events as more negative innately. This positivity should preferably be authentic. We do not necessarily want privilege positivity in a disingenuous way. The more authentic your attitude and thoughts to positivity are, the more impactful, sustainable and long-lasting your contentment (7Cs). Awareness (4As) and acceptance (4As) allow us not to exclude or resist to anything with our nonjudgement and mental flexibility. Yes, we can trick our brains by smiling, laughing and telling ourselves positive stories others may (or may not) see as “fake” but we are allowed to train our conscious and unconscious mind for positivity because there is no fake or real, nor bad or good, there just is. Still, it may be useful to distinguish authentic appreciation from forced positivity or fake appreciation. It is fake mostly if you do not believe in it but remember that you already believe in so many things that aren’t objectively true. You are a walking, talking, thinking and breathing liar. Use positive and compelling stories to your (self) advantage and to the advantage of others (selfless) with awareness (4As) and compassion (7Cs).

“True” or authentic appreciation includes awareness (4As) of difficulty and challenge (11Cs). It doesn’t deny negative emotions—it can however change them, especially with acceptance (4As). It emerges naturally rather than being imposed—but can have occasional external help or internal priming. All in all, it encompasses complexity and contradictions to find joy and elevation.

As we saw in the previous chapter, we can accept the presence of negative emotions, still we can react with awareness and endeavor to change them. One way to do this is to simply genuinely appreciate life. Author and musician Douglas Wood goes as far as saying: “The heart that gives thanks is a happy one: For we cannot feel thankful and unhappy at the same time.” His song *Little Blue Ball* helps us appreciate the preciousness, fragility and beauty of Earth. Life, biology, greenery, oceans, plants, plantations and planets are underappreciated by many. This thankfulness is both specific and expanding. Refer to the mindful zooming exercises in chapter 1 for practical tips for cultivating it and know that is also linked to the awe we will discover in chapter 4.

I asked a stranger what his definition of happiness was, and his answer was: agriculture. No, not attention (are you paying attention?)—see *Don’t Be Authentic, Pay Attention!* for more on that subject and other As after awe. Although I met him in the city, he was raised on a farm, and he learned to thoroughly enjoy and appreciate the opportunity and challenge to labor his land. The process of cultivating, preparing and eventually growing took several years before any financial gain and every hard day at work was its own reward. He appreciated the moments as meaningful and the big picture of his endeavor while solemnly perfecting his craft (11Cs). He used patience (8Ps), had passion (8Ps) and plenty of purpose (8Ps). Talking more with this genuinely happy man I learned that he also mostly did the work with his beloved brother which gave him immensely pleasure through connection (7Cs). It seems his was

also connecting with nature and curious (7Cs) about how to best cultivate each type of tree, crop, etc. This man was in his late 50s and looked young, happy, having fun and surrounded by kind and funny people, three of which he eventually introduced me to and were all cordial and funny. His name is Paul. Paul appreciates life for life itself. He also attracts and appreciates people as we will see more of the benefits in below section.

Appreciate People

Use curiosity (7Cs) and compassion (7Cs) to find something to care (11Cs) about and appreciate even in the person you detest and vilify the most. Why do you hate and underappreciate someone—sometimes to the point of wishing them harm? Use the lessons of chapters 1 and 2 to ask yourself these hard and necessary questions.

Appreciation of others creates a profound ripple effect in our psychological and social well-being, operating through several interconnected mechanisms. When we genuinely appreciate others, we activate what psychologists call "secure attachment patterns," strengthening our sense of connection (7Cs) and safety in relationships. People often seek CSW in the world, and especially in relationships. The acronym developed by one of my mentors and stellar couples & family therapist and teacher Dr. Bonnie Lee stands for: Connection, Safety and Worth. Appreciation has the capacity to fulfil all three of these functions and fundamental human needs.

Appreciation cultivates these three fundamental aspects of human experience in the following ways. Connection through appreciation creates attunement (not atonement) to others' presence (8Ps) and contributions. It deepens recognition of interdependence and oneness. It enhances empathetic awareness (4As), strengthens bonds through expressed appreciation, cultivates shared positive experiences, builds bridges across differences through mutual appreciation and creates reciprocal cycles of acknowledgment. It fosters authentic engagement with others

Safety found in appreciation develops trust in life's supportive aspects, builds confidence in navigating challenges, establishes stable reference points of goodness and creates psychological security. It can reduce threat perception through positive focus and enhance nervous system regulation—as with acceptance as we saw in previous chapter. It builds resilience through recognition of resources and creates safe spaces through appreciative attention, action and presence (8Ps).

Worth can be found through appreciation by recognizing inherent value beyond achievements and focus on the action, intention or individual's worthy traits and attributes. We are talking about giving As and not Es for effort! Yes, the participation ribbon in grade school soccer or chess tournament is also awesome as an adult. We can do more than participate of course, and often it is enough to be fully present (8Ps). Worth from appreciation enhances recognition of personal contributions and strengthens the sense of belonging through mutual appreciation.

You can also build self-worth through self-appreciation and develop authentic self-acknowledgment that carries well to others if not wrapped in egoic arrogance. It creates positive self-reference points and builds confidence through recognition of capabilities. This fosters genuine self-worth independent of external validation. When you don't need others to shower you with compliments, you can concentrate on real contributions without expectation.

The synergistic effects of CSW and appreciation are multifold. Let's look at a few combinations:

Connection (7Cs) + Appreciation (4As) + Safety = Deeper Relationships

Appreciation (4As) + Safety + Worth + Creativity (7Cs) = Authentic Self-Expression

Appreciation (4As) + Worth + Connection = Meaningful Contributions + Collaboration

Appreciation (4As) + Worth + Curiosity (7Cs) = Safety + Openness

In practice, this creates upward spirals of positive experience and optimal human flourishing with confidence, challenge (11Cs), contentment (7Cs) and without overwhelm. To remain in the safety zone, I encourage a climate of nonjudgment and the fundamental right to make mistakes and errors. To build sustainable well-being and genuine happiness, create a safe zone of experimentation (12Es) where people and processes are appreciated for their inherent worth.

The practice of appreciating others' qualities and achievements triggers what researchers call "capitalization"—the process of deriving positive emotions from others' successes. This directly counters envy by reframing others' wins as collective enrichment rather than personal loss. Compersion (7Cs) is the opposite of jealousy and envy. Studies show that people who regularly practice appreciation experience higher levels of oxytocin (the "bonding hormone") and lower cortisol (the "stress hormone"), creating a physiological foundation for emotional stability. When we are emotionally stable and feel safe, we can listen better, think better and act better because we are no longer in narrow-focused survival mode but can see the world with increased awareness (4As), curiosity (7Cs) and creativity (7Cs). I would say that people may often seek a different CSW with C being comfort, but we know that comfort zone is not the zone of curiosity and creativity. In fact, we saw that awareness always comes at the cost of discomfort and cognitive dissonance. To truly be aware we must constantly seek discomfort and appreciate it. We need and should want people in our lives who challenge (11Cs) us positively (8Ps).

Compersion (7Cs)—finding joy in others' joy—emerges naturally from deep appreciation. Unlike the scarcity mindset that fuels jealousy, compersion operates from a growth and abundance perspective where others' happiness adds to, rather than detracts from, our own. Research in positive psychology shows that people who cultivate compersion report stronger social networks, greater life satisfaction, and more resilient responses to personal setbacks. It's as if appreciating others' light helps us better navigate our own darkness. With compassion (7Cs) we create the space for patience (8Ps) and positivity (8Ps).

The neuroscience of appreciation reveals that regularly acknowledging others' qualities strengthens our brain's positive attention networks. We focus on the worth of others and our appreciation, even if only in thoughts give us renewed worth and purpose (8Ps). This makes us more attuned to constructive aspects of relationships and life in general, creating an upward spiral of social and emotional well-being. Studies show that couples who maintain a 5:1 ratio of appreciation to criticism not only stay together longer but report higher individual happiness levels. Imagine if you can make it 10 to 1 regularly and have many criticism-free days—think yourself as an Ace goalie in the appreciation team and remember that you do not want to let the subpar criticism rivals let any goal in! Every criticism-free (or complain-free) day is a shutout and that also increases your self-appreciation and worth.

When we consistently appreciate others, we develop what psychologists term "secure base scripts"—mental models that help us view relationships as sources of support rather than competition. This security makes us more emotionally stable because we're less likely to perceive others' successes as threats. Instead of burning energy on comparison and jealousy, we can channel it into growth and connection (7Cs). As relationship expert Esther Perel notes, "The quality of our relationships determines the quality of our lives." In my personal life, I once tried a practice of singing a song with my partner simply and stupidly humming along "thank you, thank you, thank you" or to randomly say thank you for no reason. Think of saying thank you for a reason as gratitude and saying thank you for non-specific reason as appreciation. More on this subtle difference later in this chapter.

We can start to say thank you for nothing, without the sarcastic connotation, and have a true attitude of appreciation.

5x more appreciation than criticism, complaint, blame or reproach may barely counterbalance our nefarious negativity bias, so, as mentioned, if you can do 10x or 20x, go for it! Positivity (8Ps) for life! In the happiness awakening journey, appreciation is that positive difference between rather neutral awareness and acceptance. Along with awe, it is the key that shifts the balance decidedly towards positivity. It may well be the Ace of all Aces.

The practice of appreciation also builds psychological resilience by expanding our support network. When we genuinely appreciate others, they're more likely to be there for us during difficult times. Research shows that people who regularly express appreciation have more diverse and reliable social support systems, which is one of the strongest predictors of resilience in face of adversity.

This appreciation-based approach to relationships creates what sociologists call "positive reciprocity loops"—where expressed appreciation leads to deeper connection (7Cs), which in turn generates more opportunities for appreciation. It's like starting a positive chain reaction that gradually transforms our social ecosystem from one of competition and scarcity to one of mutual support and abundance. The more we appreciate others' unique qualities and successes, the more we come to see that there's enough room for everyone to thrive in their own way. Appreciation can be specific and can also be global, timeless and formless. Thank you. I appreciate.

One particularly powerful aspect of appreciation is its ability to transform workplace dynamics. Organizations that foster cultures of appreciation show higher employee engagement, lower turnover, and better collaboration. When team members feel genuinely appreciated for their distinctive contributions, they're more likely to support each other's success rather than compete for recognition. This creates what management scholars call "psychological safety"—an environment where people feel secure enough to take risks, share ideas, and celebrate others' achievements. Again, that is all CSW in one where worth and connection are promoted in a safe space, and where courage (7Cs) and creativity (7Cs) are encouraged.

The impact of appreciation extends beyond immediate relationships to create broader social resilience. Communities where appreciation is regularly expressed tend to show greater social cohesion (11Cs) and collaborative problem-solving abilities. By recognizing and valuing diverse contributions, appreciation helps build bridges across differences and strengthens our collective capacity to face challenges (11Cs) together.

Finally, cultivating appreciation for others paradoxically enhances our own self-worth. When we can genuinely celebrate others' qualities and successes, it indicates a secure sense of self that doesn't need to compete or compare. This security makes us more emotionally stable and better able to maintain healthy boundaries while remaining deeply connected to others. CSW for all. As the saying goes, "A rising tide lifts all boats"—awareness (4As) and appreciation (4As) help us see that we're all in this ocean together.

Appreciate Philosophy

In Zen Buddhism, appreciation is central to the concept of "direct experience"—perceiving reality without the filters of judgment or conceptual overlay. As expressed in the famous koan: "Before enlightenment, chop wood carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood carry water." The difference lies not in the activity but in the quality of appreciation brought to it. Awareness will guide this appreciation and be indispensable during the entire process of this approach. The 1993 movie *Groundhog Day* shows the transformation of Phil Connors (played by Bill Murray) from cynicism to appreciation, suggesting that depth of perception rather than novelty of experience creates meaning and joy.

Western philosophy focuses on phenomenology—a fancier word for “direct experiences” and perceptions. Edmund Husserl's approach emphasized “bracketing” our assumptions to see phenomena with fresh eyes—a form of deliberate appreciation. Beginner’s mind is a form of seeing the world with new, innocent and curious eyes advanced by Buddhist philosophy and we will explore the concept further in this chapter and how it relates to positive awe in the following chapter.

Appreciation also connects to Aristotle's assertion that philosophy begins in wonder—not in gratitude or utility, but in pure appreciation of existence. Wonder is a close cousin and precursor of awe. Talking about existence and existentialism, Albert Camus proposed that meaning and purpose (8Ps) emerges not from external sources but from our capacity to appreciate life despite its apparent absurdity. His interpretation of the Myth of Sisyphus suggests that appreciation of the journey itself transforms seemingly futile tasks into meaningful experiences.

Appreciation helps us find gorgeousness, significance and importance to all, while lowering our self-importance (ego) yet still increasing or self-worth with lightness, playfulness (8Ps) and additional perspective—increased awareness (4As). Do not take anything too personal. Do not take anything too seriously, nor for granted.

No Appreciation or Gratitude = For Granted

Appreciate Psychology and Literature

Research by Barbara Fredrickson and other psychologists has shown that appreciation broadens awareness (4As), adaptability and attention—see *Don’t Be Authentic, Pay Attention!* It also enhances creativity (7Cs), problem-resolution, and cognitive flexibility. It builds psychological resilience, strengthens social connections—especially when expressed—and improves several physical health markers.

We saw the example of the lottery ticket winners at the beginning of the chapter. The hedonic treadmill describes how we quickly adapt to both positive and negative changes, returning to a baseline level of satisfaction. However, research suggests that cultivating appreciation can help counteract this tendency by:

1. Maintaining novelty and curiosity (7Cs) through fresh perception
2. Deepening presence (8Ps) and engagement with experience
3. Finding new layers of meaning and broader purpose (8Ps)
4. Connecting (7Cs) experiences to wider values and comprehensive awareness (4As)

Marcel Proust's "In Search of Lost Time" offers perhaps literature's most profound exploration of appreciation through his famous madeleine episode, where a simple cookie unlocks vast realms of memory and meaning. While Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" exemplifies appreciative awareness, celebrating the extraordinary in the ordinary: "I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars."

Others argue that emphasis on appreciation can reinforce privilege and inequality by discouraging necessary positive personal, relational or cultural change—for instance by Ignoring systemic issues. In some critiques’ view, appreciation could promote passive acceptance. We clearly saw in the last chapter that acceptance does not need to be passive or resigned but on the contrary allows action when acceptance is active, deliberate and dynamic. These critiques highlight the importance of balancing appreciation with critical awareness and action, which I agree and addressed in chapter 1 and 2. I will explore later the primordial role of action as an anchor to personal and global happiness in *Don’t Be Authentic, Pay Attention!* Let us see here how we can put appreciation in action in various synergic ways with what we have learned so far.

Appreciation in Action

Potential practical appreciation applications using our key concepts include:

- Educational programs combining appreciation, passion (8Ps) and learning
- Environmental education and nature connection (7Cs) through appreciation
- Mindful appreciation practice with presence (8Ps)
- Therapeutic approaches emphasizing appreciative awareness (4As)
- Organizational cultures building on appreciative inquiry and curiosity (7Cs)
- Cross-cultural understanding and connection (7Cs) through shared appreciation
- Art appreciation homage or critic combining creativity (7Cs) and awe (4As)

See more on art in the next section to get you your artistic dose of day. I may even suggest you add a musical soundtrack as you read it—if you are able to concentrate on reading with music. I would put wordless music myself and specifically uplifting *nina* by Jean-Michel Blais but that is just me. Pick the most appropriate accompaniment—and appreciate (4As)—or read along with ambient sound of wherever you are reading from. Notice now that I mentioned ambient sound, you will start to notice—people around, the sound of the refrigerator, car or fan, crackling sounds in buildings or forests (Lord Huron’s *Meet Me in the Woods* song?), electronics, your own heartbeat perhaps. That is the power of directed attention—and potent distractions—we will save further commentary until the next book. For now, let’s continue, ready or not—music or not. (*Ready or Not* is The Fugees’ music)

Appreciate Art

I met Nate at a rare independent cinema viewing. Nate is a filmmaker who took over two years to create a movie with only \$7000. That is like building a house with no money—which may still be possible only in places like remote North Vietnam villages I visited or the worst slums of the planet—or building a space rocket that escapes our planet with a few million dollars. In either case—even if you are Elon Musk—, good luck! I personally helped produce and cast an ultra-low budget film which had at least 10 times the budget two decades before. I saw a British film made for about that with extraordinary circumstances and in days instead of over a month but even in free and few locations and with unpaid actors, that is low as can get.

Nate spent maddening weeks of shooting, mostly in his apartment and had days of near despair when the project could not get more funding for additional takes and filming. He managed to call favors for additional actors to do two more days of shooting for free and then decided he would spend the better part of a year to edit the limited footage alone without the extra two weeks of filming he would have hoped to obtain the extra money to complete his cinematic vision. He was using perseverance (8Ps) and creativity (7Cs). Creativity both in his project and to get the project done, one way or the other. Finding solutions with no resources, innumerable roadblocks but with purpose (8Ps) and passion (8Ps)

The point of appreciating art will be more apparent in the next chapter as it is often one the key elements that can most easily and effectively evoke awe. However, the point of this story is perhaps more to appreciate the act of creating. Applying yourself with excitement and enjoyment in the work you do even if it is not as “creative” as you think or would like. Creation can be anything, be work done by accountants, acrobats, ambulance technicians or airplane pilots. All create an opportunity to serve the world and in a way which we may even call art and certainly involves degrees of creativity—no picking on the “creative accounting” pun. Is piloting a plane (which pilots itself for most of long flights) as artistic as an acrobat or the calligraphy of an accountant or medical doctor? I don’t know. Acrobatics has a large part

of athletics involved and is the performance more or less artistic if the choreography was conceived by other like the song for the singer or the play/screenplay for an actor? All this to say everything can be art and also not be art, as we have no free will and life is an illusion. Life if anything, is art itself so appreciate it as you should start to appreciate existence by now.

Nate mentioned something very Important in the process to make his ultralow-budget indie film: he enjoyed, had fun and appreciated all of it. I did not particularly like the film as such, yet I deeply appreciated the experience, some specifics ideas and novelties, and even more the extended Q&A period which gave rise to personal and professional candor on the creative—sometimes destructive—process behind the camera and beyond the doom editing ether.

Appreciation in art and life can change across the individual lifespan, history, as well as across cultures. Some cultures favor—or favored—fat or chubby people, whereas others skinny or slim to appreciate. European cinema is slower and more philosophical and American cinema is usually faster-pasted and shallower. Some cultures prefer different sports, or arts more than sports. Familiarity with history, traveling and cultural exposure can help reduce the enormous appreciation anemia, along with high doses of creativity (7Cs) and curiosity (7Cs). John Lennon's "In My Life" demonstrates how appreciation can encompass both past and present, celebrating change while honoring memory.

Appreciate Things

Oscar-winner and one of my personal favorite films of the last century, *American Beauty* uses the infamous plastic bag scene to illustrate how appreciation can reveal beauty in the seemingly mundane. The phrase in the screenplay screams "Sometimes there's so much beauty in the world, I feel like I can't take it." This is echoed by epic poem from rapper Canibus' *Poet Laureate II* whose protagonist reached his lot of appreciation when he says: "I ain't seen it all but I've seen enough. Really unbelievable stuff."

This is how active appreciation can lead to awe as we will see in the next chapter. In the meantime, we can simply start to appreciate things. Plastic (or paper) bags, streets, sewers, lampposts, couches, counters, cups, forks, plates, tables, beds. We interact with so many things on daily basis, and we often forget to appreciate them. Not only for their benefit or utility, but for their often hidden or forgotten beauty!

I did a week exercise to appreciate more material things and see their intangible worth, value and significance. What a fun and fulfilling experience. I think I never enjoyed my toothbrush and shoestrings in my life! Appreciating things in this way does not make you more materialist or focused on the monetary or status value of things. On the contrary, it liberates you from it while still appreciating the aspects and the alternate aspects of material objects.

We can appreciate things with monetary or sentimental value. We can appreciate their fundamental elements, their functional or aesthetic aspects. A beautiful flower vase is functional and lovely—it may have added purpose (8Ps) if someone gave the vase or flower to you.

We can also appreciate things that do not belong to you—with awareness you may remember that nothing belongs to "you", as possessiveness is ego and false identity. Life is a gift, and one day you must give it back. Nothing is "yours". Things can also be buildings, dirt, rocks, minerals, and precious water. I have learned to appreciate every gulp of water I take for instance. You can also appreciate the invisible air you breathe—you may sometimes see the exhale when the air is cold (or when smoking), but the air is always there and often underappreciated.

Appreciate nature and the living: animals, plants, parasites, microbes, viruses, cells, organs—like your heart and lungs (no smoking if you really appreciate it). Appreciate your brain. Brain health is important—food, sleep and protection from physical blows. When you appreciate, you tend to take care

(11Cs) and cherish (11Cs). Cherish your body and your microbiome, including useful bacteria. Appreciate all life even annoying insects, ugly animals, anomalies that make you sick like cancer or viral diseases like dengue and HIV. Hemorrhagic fever virus—like Ebola, Crimea-Congo, Junin, Machupo and Marburg—can be deadly to humans, yet have their own beauty and those who survive develop immunity. Appreciate immune and lymphatic systems as well. Appreciate that many viruses also keep us alive. They form part of the body's synergetic safeguard to our health, including on our skin, digestive, respiratory and reproductive tracts. Some viruses can kill dangerous bacteria, while others can fight against more treacherous viruses. *¡Viva los virus!* Awareness without judgement allows us to appreciate almost infinitely.

Appreciate immaterial ideas and beautiful concepts like love. Appreciate the four Aces, the 7Cs and the 8Ps. Appreciate language and literature. Appreciate freedom, fulfillment, gratitude, and kindness.

Self-Appreciation

The self does not exist in an independent way. We are all connected in oneness as seen in chapter 1. Still, we can accept (4As) ourselves, or rather the awareness of our sensations, thoughts, emotions and feelings as such. We can then act or not act based on accepting our body and mind. The more awareness (4As) we have, the better we may act with compassion (7Cs) and compersion (7Cs). When you accept yourself, be very careful not to accept your false beliefs and false limitations. We have physical limitations—and less than we sometimes think—but the mental barriers we put up are mostly beliefs and stories. They are all stories.

After we are self-aware (or aware of non-self), we can accept, act (or not act) and appreciate our self (or awareness of non-self). You may want to reread the last sentence. It is coherent (11Cs) and clear (7Cs) but perhaps not to the untrained mind. If you didn't completely get it the first or second time, continue and come back to it later, or even better, discuss it with someone and have fun dissecting it.

What does self-appreciation look like? Let's start by what it is not: arrogance, ego, justification, self-importance, narcissism, etc. It is the being grateful for the body that you were born with and the one you have today—it is appreciating these bodies are different. It is appreciating the mind who is reading this, learning and enjoying. It is being grateful for the gift of consciousness and appreciating the awareness journey you continue to pursue. It is appreciating the part of existence you have the chance to personally experience. That opportunity and gift you only have access to, even as it is part of a greater awareness and existence—oneness.

Appreciate Situations

Simply appreciate any situation as such, and do not add your stupid judgement. Your judgment is stupid because it is normally ego-based and has several inherent negativity biases we saw in *Beyond Happy*. Nonjudgement is better. Appreciation is a positive story of now with nonjudgement. Neurologically, unexpected outcomes perceived positively can be the basis for appreciating. We must then make sure to not see any specific situation as negative and simply accept it as we saw in the last chapter. Then we can cultivate true appreciation, including the fact that it may be unexpected. We just need to add the positive spin to it.

Appreciation = Positive Story + (Expected or Unexpected) Event

Finding profound appreciation in challenging situations may require some awareness (4As) and creativity (7Cs). Let's look at some examples, each illuminating different aspects of transformative understanding of peace (8Ps), joy and contentment (7Cs).

A job loss can initially feel devastating, but deep appreciation might arise for the forced pause in life's momentum, especially if we accept (4As) it readily instead of resist with futility. One executive reported that her unexpected layoff led her to appreciate the unconscious patterns she'd developed—constant rushing, defining herself through work, neglecting relationships. The sudden stop allowed her to appreciate previously invisible aspects of life: morning light through her window, conversations with her children, the luxury of unstructured time or play (8Ps). She later described the layoff as "the harsh teacher that taught me to truly live again." Another nonprofit activist founder and director of thousands of volunteers said that "the gift I received from the universe was malaria" which allowed her to change her activism career towards a new passion (8Ps) with purpose (8Ps).

Physical pain or illness, while undeniably challenging, can spark profound appreciation for the body's complexity and resilience. A chronic pain sufferer shared how his condition led him to deeply appreciate the pain-free moments he'd previously taken for granted. More surprisingly, he began appreciating the pain itself as an intelligent signal from his body, a reminder of his aliveness, and a teacher of patience (8Ps) and presence (8Ps). His perspective shifted from fighting the pain to appreciating its role in teaching him a new way of being. I do the same when the bitter cold reminds me of my muscles and bones as my Canadian winter hits -40C (-40F) and I briefly question why I live where it is only a question of minutes before you die, if not properly clothed. I say "I am happy to *feel* that I am alive" even if perhaps not for long. I also praise the opportunity to feel sensations and parts of my body I never would have known existed if not for the bitter cold. This is extreme cold exposure.

Relationship conflicts, especially recurring ones, can be reframed through appreciative awareness. A couple described how their most heated arguments, when viewed with perspective, helped them appreciate their passionate (8Ps) care (11Cs) for the relationship. They learned to appreciate how their triggers revealed unhealed parts of themselves, how their differences highlighted each person's unique strengths, and how working through conflicts built deeper trust than constant harmony could not have provided.

Environmental challenges like severe weather events can spark unexpected appreciation. During an extended power outage, one community discovered a deeper appreciation for modern conveniences they'd taken for granted, while simultaneously appreciating their innate adaptability and capacity for cooperation. They found themselves appreciating the darkness for showing them the stars, the silence for enabling deeper conversations, and the disruption for revealing their resilience. I personally love to find candles when there is power outage. We lost power in a restaurant in winter 2025. I was with an American friend visiting and I appreciated the soft flicker and tamed, romantic aura, as we continued our riveting conversation with low-light and light-hearted staff attending us. I have also been to a restaurant where they close the lights on purpose to make you experience total darkness and eat with different senses, being served by blind waiters. Excellent encounters and opportunities to appreciate.

When the 1998 Montreal Ice Storm hit, my mom's home, where I was mostly living, lost power and I appreciated my girlfriend's family—appreciate people—for letting me stay at their home for a few days. It allowed me to be closer to my passionate (8Ps) love, build connection (7Cs) and use creativity (7Cs). Later, her mother's home also lost power, and we ended up at my father's house where he had a fireplace—appreciate things. There we had a different and playful (8Ps) experiences. We laughed a lot when someone had a spectacular fall trying to walk on the icy sidewalk among many memorable adventures. Ice, Ice, Baby.

Financial hardship, while stressful, can lead to appreciating non-monetary wealth. A family who downsized during economic difficulties reported discovering appreciation for simpler pleasures like home-

cooked meals, game nights, walking in nature. They began appreciating their creativity (7Cs) in finding free ways to enjoy life, their growing resourcefulness, and most importantly, how the constraints strengthened their bonds and connection. The mother noted, "We lost our excess, but gained appreciation for what truly matters." Choices and financial flexibility may lead to distractions instead of presence (8Ps) and focused attention as we will see in *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention!* .

The key pattern in each example is not denying the difficulty but expanding awareness (4As) to include the growth, learning, and unexpected gifts that arise through challenging experiences. This transforms the relationship with hardship from pure adversity to a complex interplay of challenge and opportunity.

The journey of developing universal appreciation unfolds through distinct stages, each building upon the last to create an increasingly expansive capacity for appreciation. Appreciate this, then that. Appreciate when it seems easy or difficult. Make it a muscle of the mind, a hard habit. Let's explore this progression from selective to all-encompassing appreciation.

To begin appreciating any given situation, start with what positive psychology calls "appreciative focusing"—deliberately identifying positive or meaningful aspects regardless of circumstances. For example, in a traffic jam, you might appreciate the chance to listen to music, the engineering of your vehicle, the complex social cooperation that built the roads, or the opportunity for mindfulness practice. This initial stage is about training your mind to find what Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg calls "the gap between events and our reaction to them." Remember we want to accept (4As), not react, and rather respond with awareness. Use the space, the time, the growing awareness (4As), until you accept (4As) with no judgement and start to appreciate (4As) each situation one by one.

Moving to appreciating all situations requires a deeper shift in perspective. This involves understanding what Zen traditions call "non-dual awareness"—recognizing that challenges and ease, pleasure and pain, are interwoven aspects of a complete experience—oneness. Begin by appreciating obvious contrasts: how darkness makes light visible, how obstacles build strength, how winter ensures spring's renewal. Graduate to appreciating more challenging situations by seeing their role in the larger tapestry of experience. Even difficult emotions become worthy of appreciation as signals of our humanity and capacity for growth.

Appreciate Experiences → Appreciate Existence → Appreciate Everything

Appreciate Everything

The leap to appreciating everything simultaneously emerges from what contemplative traditions call "panoramic awareness." Start with physical space—appreciate the entire visual field rather than individual objects. Expand to include all sensory input simultaneously—sounds, sensations, thoughts, emotions. Notice how each element contributes to the richness of the moment. This practice can be linked to a prominent explanation of consciousness that neuroscientist Bernard Baars and late cognitive scientist Stan Franklin coined the global workspace theory (GWT) which makes a metaphor of our mind as the "theater of consciousness". The global workspace—the brain's ability to hold multiple streams of information in conscious awareness—is like a "spotlight of selective attention" shining a bright spot on stage, revealing the contents of consciousness. This ability can be trained to develop and encompass more in the aware spotlight.

More Awareness 4As = More (Possible) Appreciation (4As)

Behind the scenes of the "theater of consciousness", in the dark, are the director (executive processes), stagehands, scriptwriters, scene designers, sound and lighting technicians, etc. They shape the

visible activities in the bright spot but are themselves invisible. This analogy looks at conscious attention, as well as the powerful unconscious brain functions also worth appreciating.

Attention is key whether it is conscious, subconscious or unconscious, and these aspects influence each other. The subconscious mind is secondary processes that includes information that we are not actively aware of but can access with determination, including subconscious beliefs, while the unconscious is automatic processes and repressed thoughts that cannot be deliberately brought to the surface. The unconscious includes intuitions, unconscious convictions, cognitive and emotional biases and deep-seated sentiments. Your attention is like a celebrity chef with three sous-chefs: Conscious (the one on TV), Subconscious (the one who remembers all the recipes), and Unconscious (the wild one who throws in secret ingredients without telling anyone). All three are cooking your mental meal simultaneously.

Your subconscious is that annoying friend who says, "I know that actor from somewhere..." and then remembers three hours later when you're brushing your teeth. It holds memories and skills you can access with some effort—though it often hands you the wrong file like an absent-minded librarian. Meanwhile, your unconscious is the basement where you store all the weird stuff you don't want houseguests to see: instincts, biases, reactions and feelings you didn't even know you had. It's running automatic processes like your personal AI. And we know artificial intelligence makes a lot of wild mistakes. Your unconscious, subconscious and conscious intelligence too!

Becoming aware of these mental kitchen staff helps you understand why you suddenly crave cookies when you're sad or why you inexplicably hate people who wear certain colors. Even if you can't fully uncover all your unconscious quirks (spoiler alert: you can't), you can at least accept that your brain is constantly running background programs without your permission.

Your unconscious is basically a lazy movie director taking shortcuts to save energy. Most of these mental shortcuts work fine—like automatically breathing without having to remember—but sometimes they make you judge books by their covers or stick with bad ideas just because they're yours. It's like your brain has installed buggy efficiency software it refuses to update.

This is why practicing awareness, acceptance, and appreciation isn't as easy as reading a few chapters and declaring yourself enlightened. Your conscious mind might be nodding along thinking, "I totally get this," while your unconscious is backstage mumbling, "Yeah, we're definitely not doing any of that."

The good news? With practice, your conscious attention can infiltrate your unconscious patterns. What you repeatedly pay attention to eventually gets VIP access to your mental nightclub. It's like upgrading your mental spotlight from a cheap flashlight to stadium floodlights—illuminating not just the stage but the whole theater, including the sticky floors and overpriced concession stand.

With enough practice, you can even appreciate your unconscious quirks by catching them in action—like watching yourself automatically reach for your phone when bored or noticing your weird dream logic upon waking up. Eventually, you might even develop unconscious appreciation—being grateful and appreciating without having to consciously remind yourself to be thankful. Imagine an appreciation ninja striking when you least expect it, like fictional Cato in the Pink Panther²⁰. You can also appreciate real Cato's²¹ morals and courage (7Cs) two thousand years earlier.

²⁰ Cato Fong is Inspector Clouseau's Chinese manservant, trained to attack him regularly to keep him alert and skilled in martial arts... to often hilarious result!

²¹ Cato the Younger was a prominent Roman known for his strict adherence to Stoic principles and his unwavering commitment to personal integrity and virtue. His asceticism despite his wealth, choosing to live a simple life and endure hardships without complaint can certainly be appreciated and admired.

Even if it is impossible to uncover the depths of our self-deceit and unconscious drives, we can be aware (4As) of them, accept (4As) and appreciate (4As). We can train our attention even at the unconscious level. More on the paramount role of attention and how it is eroding in our society in *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention!* Practice, priming and visualization are techniques for modulating our attention. Our brain is a superstar at recognizing patterns so if we give it something to pay attention—useful or not—it will. Remember as a child, you may have looked at the patterns on sidewalks while walking or lampposts as you parents drove. Later you noticed all those “coincidences” because your brain was ready and wired for them. Korean culture for instance believes that every pregnant woman should have a “baby dream” which signifies something about the fetus and future human. If the mother does not remember such a dream, then her family or friend can have a connected and meaningful dream. If the whole culture believes this, it is likely that someone will eventually have a “baby dream” in the months before or during pregnancy and fulfil this cultural prophecy. It is the same idea for almost any miracle, superstition or assumed synchronicity. Our brains assume these events are connected. They are because we were looking for these connections. In fact they are connected, simply not in the way we may think. Everything is connected, remember! So, instead of appreciating (nor not) the funny details or particulars, learn to automatically appreciate everything as the awareness of oneness or universal profound connection (7Cs).

To deepen this capacity, practice what could be called “fractal appreciation”—seeing how each part contains and reflects the whole. In a single breath, appreciate the immediate physical sensation, the evolutionary journey that developed respiration, the atmospheric conditions making it possible, and the universal rhythms of expansion and contraction it mirrors. In a conversation, appreciate the immediate exchange, the cultural evolution of language, the neurological dance of communication, and the fundamental human need for connection it represents.

The ultimate stage involves what might be called “holistic appreciation”—recognizing and celebrating the interdependent nature of all phenomena. This doesn't mean constantly maintaining peak states of appreciation, but rather developing a background awareness of the marvel of existence itself. It's similar to what physicist Richard Feynman described when he said that scientific understanding enhanced rather than diminished his appreciation of a flower's beauty. Appreciate and awe are beyond beauty. We can appreciate and be in awe of “ugliness” too for instance. Everything is part of our perfect, incredible and interactive world. That plastic bag from *American Beauty* we saw in the above *Appreciate Things* section or the plastic surgery of Koreans, Colombians or Brazilians we may also appreciate without judgement. Equally appreciate people with natural and saggy faces, tummies, butts and breasts. Appreciate firefighting volunteers and arsonists. Appreciate victims of incest and rape, as well as child molesters and rapists. Bring compassion (7Cs) as that background awareness (4As) song. Do not judge, accept (4As), forgive completely, let go and enjoy existence with all its eccentricity. If you have no ego delusion, you will realize you are not there to judge but can only inspire by action and compassion.

Practically speaking, you might develop this through daily practices at three stages (or spotlights to expand). Morning: Appreciate the symphony of processes that maintained life while you slept. Throughout the day: Set regular pauses to systematically increase awareness to include multiple layers of experience. Evening: Review the day's events looking for hidden gifts and connections (7Cs). Notice they are all connected anyway in the end.

For specific cases, try the following tips:

- During challenges: Practice “both/and” thinking—appreciating both the difficulty and the growth opportunity

- During dilemmas or resistance: Practice "no but, just and" thinking and speaking—appreciating that you can change any “but” to an “and” in a sentence and accept them both as equal possibilities or realities. More on communication tricks, later in this happiness series.
- In relationships: See each person as a unique expression of life's creativity (7Cs), be curious (7Cs), compassionate (7Cs) and appreciate many small things until you appreciate all that being's essence.
- In nature: Feel your participation in the larger living system. Bliss and awe (4As) can easily arise from nature as we will see in chapter 4. Pay attention and appreciate.
- In ordinary moments: Recognize the remarkable complexity making simple experiences possible and thus exceptional. Find extraordinary and awesome everywhere.

Remember that full appreciation doesn't mean constant conscious awareness of everything—that would be overwhelming. Instead, it's about developing what Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh called "interbeing"—a deep recognition of the interconnected nature of all things that naturally evokes appreciation. This becomes a background frequency through which all experience is filtered.

The key is gradual development through regular practice. Start with appreciating one aspect of experience fully, then expand to include contrasts and challenges, then multiple dimensions simultaneously. Like building physical strength, this capacity grows through consistent exercise but requires balance and rest. The goal isn't perpetual peak experience but rather a deepening capacity to recognize and celebrate the miracle of existence in all its manifestations. Flexible and adaptable mind to appreciate what was previously unacceptable—say social or personal injustice—and appreciate people, things, situations, circumstances, consequences and everything. That even includes a special appreciation for uncertainty, impermanence, death and finality, which are all part of this riveting song and play. We can illuminate the stage and not call it a tragedy but a sublime satire or comedy.

This practice transforms not just our experience but our fundamental relationship with life itself. We move from seeking specific experiences to appreciating the entire dance of existence, including our own role as conscious participants in its unfolding.

Appreciation vs. Gratitude

At first glance, appreciation and gratitude might seem like synonymous concepts—both positive mental states oriented toward recognizing value. However, their subtle distinctions reveal important insights about human psychology and wellbeing. While gratitude focuses on acknowledging benefits received, appreciation encompasses a broader state of recognizing and savoring inherent worth—whether or not we directly benefit.

As Victor Frankl noted in "Man's Search for Meaning," even in the darkest circumstances, one can find meaning through appreciating beauty and love. This capacity for appreciation, distinct from gratitude, proved crucial for survival in concentration camps. "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances." Attitude will also be examined in *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention! as a pivotal contributor to happiness (or unhappiness)*. Frankl also experienced awe and beauty, even in otherwise bleak surroundings. Awe is the topic of chapter 4 below.

Psychologists see gratitude socially as perception that one has benefited from the costly, intentional, voluntary action of another person and is thought to solve problems related to resource sharing by coordinating responses to another's altruism and motivating patterns of reciprocity²².

Recent neuroscience research has revealed fascinating distinctions in how appreciation and gratitude manifest in the brain. While both activate the ventral and dorsal medial prefrontal cortex, regions associated with positive emotions and reward processing, they show different patterns:

Gratitude primarily engages:

- The anterior cingulate cortex (moral cognition and reward)
- The nucleus accumbens (pleasure and reward)
- Regions associated with social bonding and reciprocity

Appreciation more broadly activates:

- The insula (present-moment awareness and interoception)
- The precuneus (self-referential processing and consciousness)
- Visual and sensory processing areas
- The default mode network (meaning-making, imagination and self-reflection)

This suggests that while gratitude is more socially and reciprocally oriented, appreciation engages deeper contemplative and aesthetic processing networks. As neuroscientist Rick Hanson puts it, "Appreciation is about presence while gratitude is about gifts."

Rather than seeing appreciation and gratitude as competing concepts, we might envision them as complementary dimensions with nuances and appreciable differences.

Figure 2: Appreciation-Gratitude Matrix

Gratitude	Appreciation
Superficial	Aesthetically rich and deeply perceptive
Social connection (7Cs)	Potentially less (social) connection
Practical	Philosophically sophisticated
Morally appropriate`	Joyful
Thankful and proper	Awe (4As) and wonder
Warm	Less outwardly expression
What's in it for me? (Ego)	Happy you are happy (Comperion—7Cs)

Gratitude theoretically can be deep and free and the best gratitude practices are. We expanded on some of them in *Beyond Happy*. However, in a social context, it can also be a social or moral contract or an unassuming or implied tally of social debt. Humans are social not only because they are inherently "good" but because they needed each other evolutionary, and their psychological makeup include helping each other but also keeping tabs (social debt) for future direct or indirect favors or advantages. When you are grateful for something someone has done, you are saying that you noticed that. Indirectly, you may morally owe that person something later and you are currently trying to pay, at least partially, your social debt by saying thank you and boosting their status and ego. This is not always the case as there are two types of friendships for example: of pleasure or utility. One may show more gratefulness to friends of

²² McCullough, M. E., Kimeldorf, M. B., & Cohen, A. D. (2008). An adaptation for altruism: The social causes, social effects, and social evolution of gratitude. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 17(4), 281–285.

utility in hopes to keep alive the advantages of their friendship, while a friend of pleasure may get more appreciation (expressed or not) simply for the joy of being in their presence. In that way social expression of gratitude is useful, but we must remind ourselves of some limitations for some form of deeper happiness and enjoyment.

Nevertheless, gratitude shares some of appreciation advantages but shows stronger effects specifically for:

- Relationship satisfaction
- Prosocial behavior
- Reduced materialism
- Depression reduction

On the physical well-being realm, we saw in the previous chapter that both gratitude and appreciation are linked to sleep quality enhancement in different and complimentary ways—and can also be combined with acceptance (4As).

The overall integration of both qualities of gratitude and appreciation may lead to:

- Rich social connections infused with deep perception
- Moral awareness combined with aesthetic sensitivity
- Practical appreciation of benefits alongside awe
- Quality and quantity of sleep

Research suggests that while gratitude requires certain cognitive developments (understanding of agency, causality, and social reciprocity), appreciation may be more fundamental and accessible even to young children. For instance, young children show natural wonder before formal thankfulness. Appreciation often feels more authentic (see *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention!*) than obligatory gratitude and some forms of appreciation persist even in cognitive decline.

It comes to mind that appreciation in popular and scientific literature remains undervalued as a strong contender for the happiness awakening journey jewel. In other words, appreciation is underappreciated, especially when compared to his sexy cousin: gratitude.

You can still be grateful to your pleasure and utility friends. Just don't forget to appreciate them too—with no expectation, nor strings attached.

Appreciation = No Attachment + No Expectation + Presence (8Ps)

Beyond Gratitude

Appreciation and gratitude, while often used interchangeably, have distinct psychological and experiential qualities that make them uniquely valuable. Appreciation tends to be more expansive, present-focused, and generative than gratitude, offering some fascinating advantages.

Appreciation involves a deeper identification of inherent value and tends to be more active and engaged.

Grateful Appreciation = Gratitude + Specific Attention

When we appreciate something, we're fully present with its qualities, like savoring a complex wine or deeply observing a sunset. This is a positive appraisal which can lead to awe as we will see in chapter 4. This active engagement triggers what psychologists call "upward spirals" — positive feedback loops that enhance our capacity for joy and presence (8Ps). For example, when you appreciate a colleague's work style, you notice subtle nuances in their approach that might be missed in a simple expression of gratitude for task completion.

The temporal dimension offers another key distinction. Gratitude often focuses on what we've received in the past or at best benefit from in the present—it's retrospective and transaction-oriented. While this is valuable, appreciation exists more fully in the present moment and can extend to things we haven't directly benefited from. You can appreciate a stranger's kindness to someone else, the elegant design of a building you'll never enter, or the complex ecosystem of a forest without any personal gain. This broader scope creates more opportunities for positive engagement with life. You can technically be "grateful for a future opportunity" but the gratitude is still rooted in the past leading to an open-ended unquantified transactional outcome—or expectation. Appreciation is less or no expectation when imagining the future, it simply projects the same attention without negative judgement as it does to the present.

Research in positive psychology suggests that appreciation has unique neurological benefits. When we actively appreciate something, we engage multiple sensory and cognitive pathways, creating richer neural connections than the simpler emotional response of gratitude. Dr. Barbara Fredrickson's "broaden-and-build" theory suggests that this type of engaged positive attention expands our awareness (4As) and builds lasting psychological resources. It's like gratitude with 8K definition clarity (11Cs), as well as the smart TV, stand, remote and surreal sound system to wake up the neighborhood or part of the galaxy.

Studies in relationship psychology, particularly those by Dr. John Gottman, have found that couples who practice appreciation—noticing and acknowledging the specific qualities they value in each other—maintain higher relationship satisfaction than those who simply express gratitude for actions. Appreciation involves seeing and celebrating the essence of something or someone, not just their utility to us. This distinction is subtle but profound: thanking your partner for making dinner expresses gratitude, while appreciating their creativity in trying new recipes or their thoughtfulness in remembering your preferences adds layers of recognition that strengthen emotional bonds. Appreciation in others can also lead to admiration as we will see in *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention!* .

Interestingly, appreciation can persist even in challenging circumstances. You might not feel grateful for a difficult situation, but you can still appreciate the growth it catalyzes or the resilience it reveals. This makes appreciation a more versatile tool for maintaining psychological well-being during tough times. It's like having a more sophisticated emotional technology that works under a wider range of conditions.

A daily practice of intentional appreciation tends to enhance our experience of life more than gratitude alone because it keeps us engaged with the richness of each moment rather than just acknowledging good fortune. While gratitude tells us "thank you," appreciation says "I see you, I value you, and I'm fully present with what makes you special." This deeper engagement with life's experiences, both ordinary and extraordinary, creates a more textured and satisfying lived experience.

Appreciation = Active Recognition

Appreciation = Attention + Worth

We saw the importance of connection, safety and worth earlier in the chapter. While gratitude remains important for social cohesion and moral development, appreciation offers a broader path to human flourishing. By developing our capacity for appreciation, we:

- Deepen our experience of life
- Enhance our resilience
- Strengthen our connections (7Cs)
- Increase our creativity (7Cs)

- Find meaning in challenge (11Cs)
- Maintain awe (4As) and wonder in familiarity

As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke advised: "If your daily life seems poor, do not blame it; blame yourself that you are not poet enough to call forth its riches." This captures the essence of appreciation as an active, creative engagement with experience rather than passive recognition of benefits received.

The integration of appreciation and gratitude, informed by neuroscience and psychology, supported by philosophy and illustrated through arts and culture, offers a rich framework for human development and wellbeing. As we continue to face challenges individually and globally, cultivating these capacities becomes not just personally beneficial but socially crucial.

Perhaps most importantly, appreciation reminds us that value and meaning are not just found in what we receive or achieve, but in our capacity to perceive and engage with the inherent richness of experience itself. In a world increasingly focused on external metrics and achievements, this message becomes ever more vital for individual and collective wellbeing.

As we continue to navigate the complexities of modern life, the cultivation of appreciation—alongside but distinct from gratitude—offers a powerful tool for maintaining perspective, finding joy, and creating meaning and purpose (8Ps). In doing so, it helps fulfill what philosopher Martin Heidegger called our essential task: not just to exist, but to dwell poetically on the earth. Dwelling is positive attention that can lead to awe (4As).

Future research should also be done on appreciation practices, looking at tangible short and Long-term effects, comparing it to control, gratitude and combined groups to further appreciate (pun intended) the power of appreciation in context.

Acknowledgement

Acknowledgement can be a step towards acceptance, appreciating and eventually awe. Let us explore how the practice of deep acknowledgment creates a pathway to more profound states of appreciation and awe.

In its most fundamental form, acknowledgment requires a particular quality of attention—more on this in *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention!* —: a willingness to fully see and recognize what is before us without immediately categorizing or judging it. When we truly acknowledge something or someone, we temporarily suspend our habitual patterns of quick assessment and instead enter a state of "beginner's mind." This initial pause in our automatic processing creates the first opening for both appreciation and awe to emerge. Consider how different it feels to truly acknowledge a tree—noting its specific patterns of growth, the unique arrangement of its branches, the interplay of light through its leaves—versus simply categorizing it as "another tree" and walking past.

Acknowledgment = Acceptance (4As) + Presence (8Ps)

The progression from acknowledgment to appreciation often follows a fascinating neural pathway. When we take the time to fully acknowledge something, our brain's default mode network (associated with routine processing) becomes less active, while areas associated with novel experience and presence become more engaged. This shift in neural activity creates what researchers call a "salience window"—a period where we're more capable of noticing subtle details and meanings we might otherwise miss. As we notice these details, our appreciation naturally deepens. It's like switching from watching a movie in standard definition to suddenly seeing it in high resolution with surround sound—the experience becomes richer and more nuanced.

The bridge from appreciation to awe often occurs when acknowledgment reveals what philosopher Martin Buber called the "thou" in what we previously saw as merely an "it." This transformation happens when our acknowledgment becomes so complete that we begin to recognize the profound mystery inherent in what we're observing. Take a simple example: fully acknowledging a child's question might start with appreciating their curiosity (7Cs) but can suddenly open into awe as we recognize the vast intelligence that allows a young mind to formulate such queries, or the miracle of consciousness that enables them to wonder about their existence. This progression demonstrates how thorough acknowledgment can pierce through our usual veils of familiarity to reveal the extraordinary within the ordinary. Nestled between acceptance and appreciation/awe, acknowledgement is a form of Ace #2.5.

The practice of deep acknowledgment also has a powerful interpersonal dimension. When we fully acknowledge another person—their experiences, efforts, struggles, and achievements—we create a "holding environment" that allows both parties to drop their defensive postures. Donald Winnicott originally came up with this concept for newborn babies, particularly the nurturing and supportive care provided by the primary caregiver, which helps the child develop a sense of security and self-awareness (4As). This is Dr. Lee's CSW in its infancy. Worth comes from being understood, communicated to, taken care (11Cs) of, and protected. Winnicott emphasized that a good holding environment fosters healthy psychological growth and development.

This psychological safety often leads to moments of shared vulnerability where appreciation can flourish. Furthermore, truly acknowledging another person's unique journey and inner world can suddenly reveal the vast mystery of human consciousness and experience, triggering genuine awe at the complexity and depth of each individual's existence.

What makes acknowledgment particularly powerful is its accessibility as a practice. Unlike awe or deep appreciation, which might seem difficult to summon at will, acknowledgment is a simple act of directed attention that anyone can choose to engage in at any moment. It serves as a practical entry point to these more profound states, much like learning to be still might serve as an entry point to meditation. By cultivating the habit of thorough acknowledgment—whether of natural phenomena, human achievements, daily experiences, or relationships—we essentially create more opportunities for appreciation and awe to arise spontaneously in our lives.

This progression—from acknowledgment through appreciation to awe—represents a kind of perceptual deepening that can transform our relationship with everyday experience. It's a reminder that profound states of consciousness don't always require extraordinary circumstances; sometimes they simply require extraordinary attention to ordinary things. The practice of acknowledgment thus becomes a kind of skeleton key, unlocking deeper levels of experience that might otherwise remain hidden behind the veil of familiarity and habit.

Cultivating Appreciation

Appreciation exercises differ from gratitude practices in their emphasis on direct experience rather than acknowledged benefits. They can also use the imagination, cognition and creativity (7Cs) to generate inner direct experiences independent of external stimuli. Appreciation can be solo, social or spiritual/universal.

Solo

Mindfulness practices specifically oriented toward appreciation might include:

- Sensory awareness exercises

- Aesthetic contemplation
- Nature immersion
- Art appreciation
- Movement awareness
- Sound bathing

Social

Appreciation in relationships manifests differently from gratitude:

- Focusing on being rather than doing
- Recognizing inherent qualities rather than actions
- Celebrating uniqueness rather than benefits
- Deepening presence (8Ps) rather than acknowledging debt (moral, emotional, physical, financial, intellectual, temporal)

In community, work or professional settings, appreciation can be cultivated through:

- Regular reflection on purpose (8Ps) and meaning
- Attention to craft and quality
- Recognition of collective achievement
- Celebration of process, not just outcomes
- Awareness of growth and learning opportunities

Spiritual/Universal

The cultivation of Spiritual and Universal appreciation interweaves beautifully with awareness practices, creating a deeper sense of connection to life itself. Here are practical approaches that combine both domains:

Dawn Appreciation Practice is a powerful way to start, drawing from both Buddhist and modern mindfulness traditions. Upon waking, take 3-5 minutes to appreciate the miracle of consciousness returning, the gift of breath, and the vast web of life supporting your existence. This might include appreciating the farmers who grew your breakfast, the rain that nourished the crops, and the sun that powers the entire system—as well as its current role in bringing light to the day in the precious present moment. This practice helps shift from a "me" perspective to a "we" or "one" perspective before the day's demands begin.

The "Pause and Perceive" practice involves setting random phone alarms 2-3 times daily. When they ring, pause completely and appreciate five elements of your immediate experience: perhaps the engineering marvel of the building you're in, the complexity of human language you hear around you, the atmospheric conditions that maintain life, the evolutionary journey that led to this moment, and the countless beings contributing to your current experience. This practice combines mindfulness with expansive appreciation. A quicker and more physical presence-based variation is one I have practiced for years. My phone alarm rings once a day and simply says: "Stop and Smile". The smile needs not be less spiritual or universal if the appreciation is activated.

Sacred movement practices offer another avenue. While walking, synchronize your breath with your steps and appreciate the intricate biomechanics of movement, the ground supporting you, and your place in the cosmic dance of existence. Thich Nhat Hanh called this "kissing the Earth with your feet"—it transforms ordinary movement into a celebration of being. Many practitioners report that this practice dissolves the illusion of separation between self and universe. This is the ultimate awareness we talked about in chapter 1.

The "Appreciation Ripple" practice involves choosing one phenomenon—like water—and spending a day tracking its presence in your experience. Notice it in your morning shower, your coffee, your body's processes, the clouds above, the plants around you. Appreciate how this single element connects you to the entire planetary system. Each day can focus on a different aspect: light, air, sound, technology, human cooperation. This practice develops what ecologist Joanna Macy calls "deep time" awareness. This is one step beyond appreciating more impermanent and specific material things in my view, although all genuine and absorbed appreciation are theoretically equal or not different in intrinsic worth. Do not let your (or other's) ego tell you that you are better because you are doing one or the other.

Evening reflection can include the "Three Spheres" practice: appreciate something from the personal sphere (perhaps your health or relationships), something from the collective sphere (human achievements or cultural heritage), and something from the universal sphere (natural laws, cosmic processes, or the mystery of existence itself). This creates a widening circle of appreciation that transcends individual experience.

Engaging with challenging experiences through appreciative awareness is particularly transformative. When facing difficulties, practice appreciating the growth opportunity, the resilience being built, and the deeper understanding emerging. This doesn't mean denying difficulty but rather seeing it within a larger context of universal processes of transformation. Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield calls this "seeing the rainbows in the tears."

The practice of "Appreciative Inquiry" can be turned toward the mysteries of existence. Rather than trying to solve life's big questions, appreciate the wonder of having a mind that can contemplate them. Appreciate the dance of known and unknown, the evolution of understanding, and the humble recognition of our place in the vast cosmic story. This combines philosophical contemplation with emotionally felt appreciation.

Lastly, develop what some call "perspective practices"—regularly zooming out to appreciate both microscopic and macroscopic scales of reality. Appreciate the quantum dance of atoms in your hand, then the astronomical dance of galaxies overhead. This cultivation of scale-shifting awareness naturally evokes what Einstein called "cosmic religious feeling"—a sense of awe and appreciation for the universe itself. We talked about zooming out (of the fishbowl and flat Earth) in chapter 1 to increase our awareness. More on practical mental zooming techniques and amazing ways to use them in the next chapter. I have personally performed these zooms—not boring Zoom calls—to reach various states of appreciation, awe, pure bliss and nirvana.

These practices work best when approached with consistency but not rigid perfection. They create what meditation teacher Tara Brach calls "moments of presence that bloom into continuous awareness." Remember that appreciation is a process like awareness and acceptance. The key is regular engagement that gradually transforms our baseline experience from routine to reverent, from mundane to miraculous. "It seems supernatural, but only because it is not understood," says John Muir in *My First Summer in the Sierra*. Acknowledging (2.5 A) this remaining mystery can be a key to appreciate and find awe all around or in the unresolved. Awareness is never complete, and sometimes ignorance can be blissful. Appreciate that too. Appreciate (4As) your unawareness, accept (4As), and (no but) be curious (7Cs) and courageous (7Cs) not to be stuck there. The fun part is there is always more. Appreciate it until there is no more—fateful death.

This brings us squarely and surreptitiously to the summon of our ultimate happiness awakening tools: Awe. We are going to a happy dentist together: say "Awe"!

4. Awe

Awe occurs in a realm separate from the mundane world of materialism, money, acquisition, status signaling—a realm beyond the profane that many call the sacred.

—Dacher Keltner, *Awe: The Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*

...diversity of this beautiful, awe-inspiring, incomprehensible planet we all live on. The rich diversity of Bolivia—and so many other countries—has changed me. Before I travelled, I took the world for granted. After all, it'd always been there. At best, the world had played a supporting role in the very "me-focused" narrative of my life. But by experiencing so much of Earth's beauty first-hand, as in Bolivia, I've begun to appreciate our smallness. The world's greatness. It's true wonder.

— Michael Mackay Richards, *The Travelling Ape*

Michael is a world traveller from the UK who has travelled more than 150 countries like me and that is no small feat. I will always recommend people to be travellers—not tourists—and to travel as often as they can to places they would not normally go to and challenge (11Cs) their assumptions about other cultures—which should also challenge “your” own culture, preferences, views and beliefs. No, going to a resort in Cancun, Cuba, Cyprus or Malta does not count as traveling; it is just a vacation! Unless you make it a point to venture far off the resort, meet genuine locals, share and stay away from sandy beaches long enough to have a purposeful encounter with curiosity (7Cs) and courage (7Cs) in potentially uncomfortable situations. Yes, pristine beaches, worldclass museums and historic monuments can inspire awe on their own and not do dismiss these experiences. However, before you get a church visit overload in Europe, mosque madness in the Middle East or religious temple tantrum in Asia (there are hundreds just near Angkor Wat), find even more profound awe in the mundane of everyday life in unfamiliar neighborhoods with people who may look, dress, talk and think different than you. We already have at least two ways to experience awe while traveling: nature and culture—living and man-made marvels. The UNESCO has an active list of World Heritage sites in 167 countries which total more than 1100 and growing if you need inspiration. Or simply contact Michael or me for suggestions—sorry Michael!

I do not suggest that you need to travel to that many countries to find awe and wonder in the world. You can even travel in your own country or community. You can travel in books and in your mind. The main point is that we normally take the wondrous world, big or small, for granted and focus on our limited views, coming from our individual and collective egos. We go to vacations our peers go to so we can feel “connected” and prove we share the “same” experience of complaining and praising places as if we were the center of the universe. How many friends I know have complained about the resort food in such and such hotel? Too many to mention. And if the beach was nice, maybe there was a complaint about the staff or the weather. Maybe your vacation or staycation was “relaxing and nice”. That may be contentment (7Cs) and even appreciation (4As) yet that is certainly not awe. Awe is wow. Awe is OMG. Awe is jaw-dropping. Awe is the ultimate appreciation.

We learned the importance of appreciating almost every situation, predicament and people in the last chapter and cultivating this ability as an unconscious reflex. In this chapter, we will go further and explain how we can cultivate awe, in Bolivia, Bhutan or Botswana, but also in your local botanical garden, library, park, coffee shop or your morning glass of water. This is the cumulation of our training.

Thank you for making it this far in the HA journey. If you are half-illiterate or tired of reading, here is the key to the chapter, in one sentence—short attention span Gen Z, I’m looking at you—:

To be awesome is not about you; it is simply to find awe in almost everything.

Voila! If you are at that level already it means you also find this book awesome. Amazing, but alas I do not require validation from you. If you appreciate, pass it forward to someone else who can appreciate, as it is not about me—nor you. Still, let’s raise our awe quotient (AQ) together. Awe—you’ve guessed it—is also a practice and not a finite state. The Four Aces all need practice, commitment and dedication. No easy hack. No magical pill. I apologize yet the process itself is of course awesome. How could it be otherwise? Let’s look at awe, in theory, in practice, in real life and in imagination.

Picture standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon as the sun rises, the vast chasm slowly filling with golden light. Or imagine looking through a microscope for the first time and seeing an entire universe of life in a single drop of water. Relish the aquatic universe you discover snorkeling or scuba-diving. I first snorkeled in the gorgeous Galapagos and scuba-dove in the pristine Maldives and magical Great Barrier Reef. I took a long horse ride in the desert to (re)discover the Giza Pyramids, not from a tourist bus but from the back entrance: the vast Sahara Desert. From the sandy hills, it was not a mirage, but a man-made marvel that appeared on the horizon in front of our small caravan of camels and a horse.

I can recall each exact experience of the six times I was blessed to encounter auroras borealis. I had to chase them for many nights in Iceland and they came easily to greet me in Iqaluit, Canada. I also saw them in the summer in Quebec on an isolated lake in Maurice National Park. It took hours of canoeing and portage to reach our remote camping location where there were no one else but by friends with two tents and two canoes. We were given the most marvelous night of our lives with multi-color Northern Lights dancing for hours and reflecting on the pristine lake where my friends and I commandeered two blissfully drifting boats in the paradisiac night.

These moments of awe—when we encounter something so vast or intricate that it transcends our current understanding—represent a unique and powerful human experience. This moment of “wow” and exaltation is the last key or Ace to the happiness awakening.

The rest of the chapter is science and stories backing up that practical phrase and insight for you, in case you are not already awesome. I am sure you are awesome. I will regale you with wondrous words—and find awe in each of them, of course—while teaching you how to become an Awe Maker Enjoying Nature. Amen!

And by nature, I mean existence itself as we saw in chapter 3. Natural phenomena, science, human nature, imagination, sacredness, community, culture, art, philosophy, psychology, sports, dance, music, senses, vibrations and more. The natural world which goes beyond material focus. Nature as all. Nature with a capital N. AMEN.

Mind Wandering

Researchers using electroencephalography (EEG) have observed that during moments of awe, there's a marked increase in gamma wave synchronization across different brain regions, particularly between the frontal and parietal cortices. This pattern of neural synchronization is similar to what's observed during insights and Aha moments—hope you’ve been having a few since the intro—but tends to be more sustained during awe experiences. Furthermore, this synchronization is accompanied by a temporary suppression of the default mode network (DMN)—the brain network associated with self-

referential thinking—which may explain why awe experiences often feel like a temporary transcendence of ordinary self-consciousness and time perception²³.

A Harvard University team found that mind wandering in the DMN was present at about 50% of the time in all (22) activities except sex. We will learn more about healthy sexuality in *Beyond Sex*, but I can mention here that mindfulness increases sexual desire and satisfaction. Reversely, sex increases mindfulness and presence (8Ps) with an overload of the senses, hormones and neurotransmitters. It generally reduces mind-wandering as the activity that focuses attention the most.

(Great) Sex = Ultimate Attention = Happiness

Mind wandering is a hallmark of the human mind, including imagination and (ego) identity, however “a wandering mind is an unhappy mind” concluded researchers Daniel Gilbert and Matthew Killingsworth²⁴. People report feeling happier when they are paying attention (see *Don’t Be Authentic, Pay Attention!*) than letting their mind wander, and this is regardless of if the activity, may it be alone or socializing. Introverts and extroverts may differ in the amount of time engaged in each, yet the attention is key to happiness in both cases. We can remember that the DMN is useful in many ways, yet it is often too focused on the missed opportunities of the past or the fear of the future. It is linked with a sensitive survival threat response (fear in the near-future and anxiety in the future’s uncertainty) that trumps normal or positive thoughts most of the time with deep-seated and ingrained negativity biases. We most constantly combat these ANTs to find a glimpse of lasting contentment (7Cs). Attention to the exact present moment, not the “in two minutes” or “in two days or years” is important for happiness. We will later see in this chapter that the DMN’s imagination function, and not the ego-focus wandering part, can be positively activated in awe experiences.

Distractions of only 2 minutes can stop the DMN mind wandering, neutral or negative rumination and is a trick I mentioned in *Beyond Happy* to reduce or reframe negativity. However, even better than distractions are presence (8Ps), attention and mindfulness.

Attention is here and now. I have two T-shirts that state “Here. Now. Us.” with artwork from the wonderful Cirque du Soleil. I try to live in the awesome awareness of the present, to “show up”, and “be present” (8Ps) in each moment. *Beyond Neurons & Hormones* will talk extensively about the roles about Here & Now (H&N) senses, brain networks and molecules. Let’s put them to good use. No comment about cheesy or checky T-shirts and bumper sticker taglines lines, please. More on Cirque du Soleil later in the chapter—*chapiteau*?

Awe Defined

Keltner and Haidt²⁵ define awe as composed of:

1. Perceived vastness—overwhelming or exceed typical experience
2. Need for accommodation—needs to make sense of it by adding new schemas and incorporating a new picture of the world that opens previous rigidity and may inspire when positive

²³ Rudd, M., Vohs, K. D., & Aaker, J. (2012). Awe expands people’s perception of time, alters decision making, and enhances well-being. *Psychological Science*, 23(10), 1130-1136.

²⁴ Killingsworth, M. A & Gilbert, D. T. (2010). A Wandering Mind Is an Unhappy Mind. *Science*. 330,932-932(2010). DOI:10.1126/science.1192439

²⁵ Keltner, D., & Haidt, J. (2003). Approaching awe, a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion. *Cognition and Emotion*, 17, 297–314.

Some awe experiences may be perceived as negative if we have difficulty accommodating them, as for instance a never-before-seen thunderstorm or flood and may illicit fear (of the uncertainty) or even terror. This means that acceptance (4As) is a prerequisite to experience positive (8Ps) awe (4As). More on negative awe later in the chapter.

We may have the possibility for growth even when initially negatively perceived. This leads to higher reality detection and lower persuasion by weak argument²⁶ or evidence. It enhances critical thinking even if the mind remains in many ways irrational as we saw throughout the book. This adaption seems to be evolutionary as it forces better and wider understanding of the world and its possibility to be recognized and accepted. Positive awe increases acceptance and awareness.

Awe (4As) → Wider Acceptance (4As) + Awareness (4As)

Awe helps give a bigger picture of the world beyond our narrow viewpoint. AMEN again. Victor Frankl found awe in the midst of despair, oppression and methodical murder in Nazi concentration camps to see past the cruelty of human nature, uncertainty and vagaries of life. He did not focus on the perceived injustice or harbored hate and resentment. Here are some of his quotes:

"Beauty is a moment of grace, an unexpected revelation that pierces through the mundane and allows us to glimpse the deeper meaning behind existence. In that moment of awe, we transcend our immediate suffering and connect with something infinitely larger than ourselves." (Awe makes our seemingly self-important worries transcend with wonder and vastness)

"The salvation of man is through love and in love. But love does not just mean romantic attachment—it means the capacity to see the essential dignity and beauty in another human being, to be moved to wonderment by the mere fact of their existence." (Awe comes from ultimate appreciation of existence as in chapter 3)

"Life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose. When we can find beauty in the smallest moments, when we can be struck by awe at the simple miracle of breathing, we transform our suffering into a meaningful experience." (Purpose and Presence—8Ps)

"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. And in that choice lies our growth, our freedom, and our ability to be moved by the extraordinary beauty that surrounds us, often unnoticed." (Awareness allows Awe—4As)

"What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled. And with that comes the experience of awe—the recognition that life itself is the most profound work of art." (Challenge—11Cs)

This reflects Frankl's profound understanding of human experience, emphasizing how beauty and awe can transform our perception of suffering, provide meaning, purpose (8Ps) and connect (7Cs) us to something greater than our immediate circumstances. We must also seek worthy challenges (11Cs) with conviction, courage (7Cs) and perseverance (8Ps).

Awe and Wonder

Although awe can be perceived as threat and act through the amygdala, let us focus on positive awe (like stargazing or seeing uncanny beauty/aesthetics) and its neurological and psychological

²⁶ Griskevicius V, Shiota MN, Neufeld SL. Influence of different positive emotions on persuasion processing: a functional evolutionary approach. *Emotion*. 2010 Apr;10(2):190-206. doi: 10.1037/a0018421. PMID: 20364895.

implications. Awe experiences downregulate the DMN²⁷ (ego), thus allowing for feelings of selflessness and oneness awareness (4As). It also deactivates the left middle temporal gyrus (MTG) responsible for matching existing schema to events—contextual expectations. An awe experience generally involves the “schema liberation” process which allows for less familiarity and enables the brain to see an experience as novel, as well as more encompassing. Positive awe is associated with increased functional connectivity between the MTG and the cingulate cortex (anterior/posterior), which are associated with the aesthetic reward process, and the supramarginal gyrus (SMG), which is involved in the self-other representation.²⁸

Common stimuli for awe experiences include nature, art, music, charismatic or inspiring people (like artists, athletes, teachers, leaders at their best). Sharing experiences of awe can strengthen social bonds (through oxytocin) and stimulate pro-social behavior like generosity and altruism.

Awe and wonder experiences buffer stress by lessening the focus and attention to the self. It is also shown to be more effective, positive, and potent than other helpful emotions, including amusement and joy²⁹. More on altruism and amusement in *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention!*.

Awe experiences, by decreasing the grip of the ego, can enable bigger picture thinking by the central executive network (CEN) and promote more rational, balanced, scientific, empathic, and ethical decision-making. Positive physical effects like tingling and goosebumps and a lowered heart rate under stress are triggered by endorphins. Some awe-struck experimental groups, when asked to draw pictures of themselves, drew themselves smaller in size, giving a pictorial representation of the decreased ego or self-importance. Such an effect has been termed “unselfing.” As you perceive and tap into something larger and your sense of self shrinks, your egocentric views, mental chatter, worries and past-future focus fade from the DMN. People who experience awe also report higher levels of overall life satisfaction and well-being.³⁰.

When we experience awe, several fascinating things happen in our brains:

1. The DMN, associated with self-referential thinking, shows reduced activity
2. The Salience Network (SN) becomes highly activated, helping us process novel and significant experiences
3. Visual and auditory processing areas show enhanced activation
4. Higher activity in the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), with connections to both the “emotional” limbic system and the “cognitive” prefrontal cortex allows greater emotional and mood (affect) regulation

All these increase the ability for awareness (4As), and to hold attention. The external focus is enhanced at the expense of the self. As neuroscientist Andrew Huberman notes, “Awe experiences create a unique neural signature that combines heightened sensory awareness with reduced self-focus.”

The neuroscientific study of awe has revealed intriguing patterns in the temporoparietal junction (TPJ), a brain region crucial for perspective-taking and self-other processing. During moments of awe, researchers have observed decreased activity in the TPJ, correlating with what participants describe as a “dissolving of the self” or “feeling of oneness”—similar to agape, as we will see later in the chapter. This

²⁷ Van Elk M, Gomes MAA, van der Zwaag W, et. al. *The neural correlates of the awe experience: Reduced default mode network activity during feelings of awe. Human Brain Mapping* 40:3561-74. 2019

²⁸ Takano, R.; Nomura, M. *Neural representations of awe: Distinguishing common and distinct neural mechanisms. Emotion*, 22(4), 669–677. 2022

²⁹ Bai Y, Ocampo J, Jin G, Chen S, Benet-Martinez V, Monroy M, Anderson C, Keltner D. *Awe, Daily Stress, and Elevated Life Satisfaction. J Personality & Soc Psychology: Attitudes & Social Cognition* 120:837-60. 2021

³⁰ Fessell DP, Reivich K. *Why You Need to Protect Your Sense of Wonder—Especially Now. Harvard Business Review*, 8-25-21. 2021.

neural signature appears distinct from other positive emotions like joy or contentment (7Cs), suggesting awe represents a unique cognitive-emotional state that changes how the brain processes self-relevant information. Awe is spatially closest to aesthetic appreciation (4As) and admiration (9As), while in the region of amusement (9As), adoration, joy and calmness³¹.

Recent research using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) during awe experiences has shown fascinating activation patterns in the anterior insula and anterior cingulate cortex—regions associated with interoceptive awareness, emotional integration and emotional processing. What's particularly noteworthy is that these activation patterns show remarkable similarity to those observed during meditation and flow states. However, awe appears to uniquely couple this internal awareness with intense external sensory processing, as evidenced by heightened activity in both primary and associative visual and auditory cortices. This may explain why awe experiences often feel like a simultaneous expansion of both inner and outer awareness without feeling the inner world as unduly important.

The brain and body benefit from awe in many ways. It is known that it triggers an increased dopamine release in the ventral tegmental area (VTA) and nucleus accumbens, similar to the reward response, but coupled with decreased cortisol production and increased oxytocin release. This unique neurochemical profile may explain why awe experiences can feel simultaneously energizing and calming.

Consciously cultivating uplifting experiences like awe and wonder is vital for healthy living in my view. Regularly ask yourself and others questions like “What took your breath away this weekend?”, “Who inspires you now and why?” or “What are two new amazing things you learned or saw this month?”

Wonder can be cultivated in conjunction with curiosity (7Cs). The more curious you become, the more cute cats you kill; I mean the more awe you will create and find. Remain flexible, adaptable and open to new experiences—even if they seem to be the same experience at first glance. Remember that you can never step in the same river twice because you and the river will have changed the second, third or thirtieth time around. You can read the same book and get new insights, see the same painting and discover new beauty, see the same play/circus/film and find new ideas, kiss the same person and have new sensations and emotions.

People can inspire you with their philanthropy, kindness, resilience, dedication, skill, self-sacrifice, courage, or brilliance. The greatest consistent compliment I get is that my words, attitude or actions have inspired others (although I do not take it as an ego boost but an indication to continue to serve others). We will see what constitutes “moral beauty” below, as the most potent source of awe in all cultures. Be inspired, be in awe—not of me; there are many more people to inspire you by their grandiosity or simplicity. Find them. Delight in them. Acknowledge and appreciate the inspiring aspects in people already in your life.

Traveling more than a month in China with my 3-month son, I was in awe of the awe people had seeing my “foreigner” or “老外” (laowai) baby with big eyes wide open. Hundreds of people wanted to touch him, hold him, take pictures with him. In one restaurant, in Chengdu, a couple offered to look after him while we ate. He was a superstar in their eyes (their unaccustomed beginner’s mind), and it allowed us to see him in a different way as well. He was in awe, they were in awe, we were in awe. We learned so much in the process, and it allowed us to have a better understanding and glimpse of Chinese culture, customs with deeper connection (7Cs) and appreciation (4As).

Three months prior, childbirth is a wondrous awe moment I got to experience—most remember it fondly and vividly (life and death are awe-inspiring)—, as well as travelling, which is often fresh, new and different by default. You can share your awe to connect (7Cs) and transcend. Shared awe is slightly

³¹ Cowen, A. (2024) www.alancowen.com

better than alone awe. Awe is powerful, free and freeing. If you are receptive, awe can also be transmitted to you by others who are experiencing awe or wonder. Children are wonder-machines or AMEN by nature. To see children discover their toes, fingers, and many aspects of their world can be examples of awe-inducing experiences. Spend more time with kids. This can perhaps apply as well to people with memory difficulties like dementia—Alzheimer’s disease (AD) and others—, and intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) like Down syndrome (DS) and some cases of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Memory can be your enemy, especially if you see your past negatively. My Taiwanese teacher friend I met in Jeju Island (South Korea) is convinced that her mother became much happier after the progression of AD, and her mother not being bothered by old negative memories. I believe her, although there are surely better ways to engage in the present with wonder and keep, even cherish, our memories. For instance, try to see the world with beginner’s mind as we saw in chapter 3. We will continue to cultivate and examine the possibility of an awe-ready, ever-curious mind in this chapter.

Awe in Culture and Rapture

We saw that awe is the emotional state (neuroendocrinal state) that arises when people feel that they are in the presence of something grand that transcends their current frame of reference. It also has many cultural references and reinforcements. It is thought as an elevated emotion.

In India, I was in Coimbatore where Sadhguru’s Isha Foundation is and in Pune where Rajneesh’s Osho International Meditation Resort is headquartered. Osho & Isha both promote wonder. Isha claims we must remain “uneducated and uncivilized”, meaning unaffected by the strong cultural component we carry and increasingly stifle us since birth. I agree that after we have learned enough, the next crucial task is to unlearn most of what you were taught with new discernment. We looked at unlearning in detail in the first chapter. Recognition of reactivity—biological and cultural—and keeping our mind as virgin as possible help the manifestation of awe. This is not ignorance but rather acute and active awareness.

Sadhguru may be inexact in his ideas of “energy”, yet he is not against reason or science. He reminds us that we can choose to see things as mundane and explainable or to see most of the world aspects as “miraculous” giving us an increased appreciation of the world around us. This does not mean that miracles exist in the religious or spiritual way, only in the way we can appreciate the explainable world more by seeing it as awe or transcendent at a lower baseline level—a cure for boredom and blasé. We can call experiences “magical experiences” to allow awe emotionally, with the cognitive knowledge that “magic” can be explained, as in complex magic tricks (not as in unexplainable conjuring of magic spells in fictional movies or literature). Explaining the “magic” can be worthy of wonder as well if seen in the correct (curious) frame of mind. We can trigger awe with feelings, with thoughts or with both. We can marvel at the vivid red of an ephemeral rose petal and also be in awe to know that it is caused by anthocyanin pigments that make the red color. Increase your awe further by connecting the dots and feeling oneness by learning that anthocyanins are also found in raspberry, blueberry, black rice, and black soybean. Depending on their pH, they may appear red, purple, blue, or black. Then forget the science, when your senses are immersed in the colorful and captivating anthocyanin-rich autumn leaves.

Osho talks about wonder and reminds us that the child’s mind and marked appreciation is useful for joy. Beginner’s mind is a Buddhist practice that encourages approaching activities with an open mind, allowing you to more fully enjoy and appreciate the present moment. Sōtō Zen master Shunryu Suzuki published the seminal book *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* in 1970. Suzuki argues that an expert’s mind can be limiting, as it may assume knowledge and superiority, while the beginner’s mindset encourages a more engaged and spirited relationship to the pursuit of a study. This of course is unbounded curiosity (7Cs)!

Shoshin (Japanese: 初心) is the term for beginner's mind. It refers to having an attitude of openness, eagerness, and lack of preconceptions. For example, when studying, even at an advanced level, try to learn just as a beginner would. The practice of shoshin acts as a counter to the hubris and closed-mindedness often associated with thinking of oneself as an expert. This includes the Einstellung effect, where a person becomes so accustomed to a certain way of doing (and thinking) things that they do not consider or acknowledge new ideas or approaches. I have met my fair share of business owners, executives or university researchers who think that way! Alas, no further awareness advancement. No AMEN for them. Better to be a janitor who is never jaded than a supposedly brilliant professor. Ask Good Will Hunting! How do you like them apples? With a pinch of awe. Does that mean that PhD stand for “pretty hard to delight” or MBA signify “majorly bored, always”? No, many highly educated people find a way to keep a (relatively) open mind. However, it is important to note the potential pitfalls of being an “expert” or thought leader in anything. Make your AMEN prayer and keep learning—and unlearning.

Beginner's Mind = No Ego + Flexible (Open) Mind + Curious + Wonder

Expert's Mind = Ego + Inflexible (Rigid/Closed) Knowledge and Thinking Patterns

When in doubt, be a child. Not losing the capacity for astonishment is rooted in children's unbounded curiosity (7Cs) and appreciation (4As) of events as novel and interesting regardless of our potential familiarity with it. The more you become an “expert” or specialized in a field, you may accumulate more knowledge but often less and less ability to detach yourself from your imperfect sources of information, learning and conclusions. There is also the cognitive bias of sunken cost. Sunken cost assumes that because we have invested time and energy in an endeavor (idea, theory, project, or person for example) we will need to continue to invest to justify our “lost” time, money, called favors or other. If we think that every moment is finite and precious, we soon realize that we can never get back time in the past but can appreciate the present as new and full of possibilities. Infinite possibilities means that they do not need to follow past patterns, projections or paths. The past, its conditions and fallacies are often a trap rather than a source of wisdom. Remember that we have a very powerful narrative self that generally overpowers the experiential self with conditions, delusions and limited beliefs. How then can we assure our mind continues to view itself as curiously learning and never complacent in conditioned contrived constructs?

Learn from culture or college. Understand, then quickly unstuck yourself to any identity to that transient learning. Awe allows greater change. Near constant awe can allow constant change. It is never “your” culture or “your” college. Challenge your innate need to “belong” before you become a belonging which others can use and manipulate to their aim. What is an army but a sublime supercherie to let us see that “they” don't belong and are wrong, and “we” do belong and are righteous. “We” is simply an amplified ego as I explained extensively in *Beyond Happy*.

Small Self or Ego Death

Awe allows the bigger picture and indirectly indicates that lesser importance of ego or self. There are other ways to reduce the importance of the ego like psychedelics. Psilocybin (the active ingredient of “magic mushrooms”) has been recently used in different doses and therapeutic settings to induce “ego death”. A friend of mine experienced it and it had a profound long-lasting imprint on his ability to be more selfless. Roshi Joan Halifax, someone who cared from the dying and a Zen Buddhist teacher, also took psilocybin and had ego death akin to a meditation practice which may take more time. Again, oneness is the answer to awareness. As we saw in the last chapter, the more we appreciate (4As) beyond ourselves, the happier we will be. Egolessness can bring awe and awe brings ego dissolution.

Awe favors enlightenment (12Es) and can lead to awareness (4As) of oneness (ultimate selflessness) and connectivity (7Cs) with the world at large. In general, positive effects include increased overall well-being, humility, connectedness (7Cs) and decreased materialism and focus on money (more focus on quality of experience). Rudd and colleagues' experiments found that awe also³²:

- Increases the sensation of available time
- Increases the presence (8Ps) in the now
- Increases patience (8Ps)
- Increases life satisfaction
- Increases experience (12Es)
- Increases willingness to volunteer their time to help other people—altruism, kindness, care (11Cs) and compassion (7Cs)

Volunteering and community activities can also induce awe itself! This is another form of virtuous circle. Awe also brings about enough curiosity (7Cs) to take more risks which enhances courage (7Cs) and allows more change and learning than in a non-awe state.

Awe and Learning

Awe enhances creativity (7Cs) and learning. Learning is linked to awe in that it allows better memory encoding of something the brain deems emotionally significant. If we explore the fascinating intersection of awe and cognitive development, we find awe allows for happiness in the now as well as in the future.

When we experience awe, our brains undergo a remarkable transformation. The prefrontal cortex, responsible for analytical thinking, shows decreased activity while areas associated with emotional processing and memory formation become highly activated. This neural pattern creates what scientists call a "small self" effect, where our sense of individual importance diminishes as we connect to something larger than ourselves.

The relationship between awe and learning is particularly intriguing. When we experience awe, our brains enter a state of enhanced receptivity to new information. This occurs because awe disrupts our standard mental scripts and forces us to update our mental models of the world. Awe allows greater awareness as we saw through transcendence or pure "shock value". Either way, we learn.

Author and awe researcher, Dacher Keltner, demonstrates that awe experiences activate "accommodation" rather than "assimilation"—meaning we're more likely to change our existing mental frameworks to incorporate new information rather than trying to force new information into our existing beliefs. This cognitive flexibility is crucial for deep learning that involves reprocessing and remodeling. In *The Playful Mind*, Paul Daniel talks about dismantling our subconsciously embedded egotistic mental frameworks—that all cause us suffering—with mental fortitude—energy and perseverance (8Ps)—and practised perspective-taking. He also encourages restoring appreciation (4As), gratitude, excitement, and wonder with awareness (4As). He suggests to "recognize that our activities are subtly different" (not just radically) to produce new excitement, newness and opportunities for awe. Attend to a renewed excitement towards existence itself. Living and existing is much more attractive than dying and not existing, don't you think? Life is sexy.

³² Rudd M, Vohs KD, Aaker J. Awe expands people's perception of time, alters decision making, and enhances well-being. *Psychol Sci.* 2012 Oct 1;23(10):1130-6. doi: 10.1177/0956797612438731. Epub 2012 Aug 10. PMID: 22886132.

Negative Bias + Negative Belief = Unhappy

Skip the ropes or the language lesson. Double Dutch may mean gibberish like the destructive stories you keep telling yourself and firmly believing in. Use awe to by-pass them like an open-heart surgery for clogged arteries. Flexible mind, less stress. Happy heart!

Studies with students have shown that incorporating awe experiences into educational settings can significantly enhance learning outcomes. For instance, when students are exposed to awe-inducing stimuli before learning new material—whether through virtual reality experiences of the cosmos, exposure to profound works of art, or encounters with nature's grandeur—they demonstrate better retention and deeper conceptual understanding. This effect appears to be related to what neuroscientists call "salience network activation," where the brain becomes particularly attuned to significant information in the environment. This is increased attention and focus.

The learning benefits of awe extend beyond mere information retention. As curiosity (7Cs) can increase awe, awe experiences have also been shown to increase curiosity and motivation to learn. When we feel awe, our brains release neurochemicals associated with reward and pleasure, creating a positive association with the learning process, and a virtuous loop of curiosity. This neurological response helps explain why children who experience regular doses of awe through exploration and discovery tend to maintain their natural curiosity and love of learning. The state of awe essentially primes our brains for learning by creating what psychologists call an "approach motivation"—we want to learn more about what amazes us.

From an evolutionary perspective, the link between awe and learning makes practical sense. Our ancestors needed to pay particular attention to and learn from experiences that challenged their understanding of the world, as these often represented either threats or opportunities. Modern neuroscience suggests that this ancient connection continues to serve us well, as awe experiences activate neural networks that enhance pattern recognition, improve memory consolidation, and boost creative problem-solving abilities. These cognitive benefits can persist for hours or even days after the initial awe experience, creating what researchers call a "learning window" during which we're especially receptive to new information and insights. Awe evolved as a mechanism to help us navigate novel situations, adapt to changing environments and especially expanding our understanding of what's possible. It also allows us to bond and connect with others through shared experiences, which is useful for happiness, trust, safety, communal learning, and ultimately helps tribal survival.

Beau Lotto, a neuroscientist known for his work on perception and human behavior, further argues that awe serves as a powerful tool for learning because it:

- Creates openness to new possibilities
- Increases our tolerance for uncertainty—accept, appreciate and embrace uncertainty!
- Enhances our capacity for cognitive flexibility (beyond resilience and adaptability)
- Makes us more receptive to new information

A study found elevated levels of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) following awe experiences, suggesting these moments promote neural plasticity and learning. The relationship between awe and learning also has a social dimension. Research shows that shared awe experiences can enhance collaborative learning by creating stronger social bonds and increasing prosocial behavior. When people experience awe together, they're more likely to share information, engage in cooperative problem-solving, and build on each other's ideas. This suggests that incorporating awe-inducing experiences into group learning settings could be particularly effective for enhancing collective knowledge construction and understanding. Awe together to learn better. AMEN!

The Circus of Awe

Beyond learning, Beau Lotto, has several key insights about awe. He sees perceptual uncertainty as a common trigger. Lotto emphasizes that awe often emerges from situations that challenge our existing mental models. He argues that when we encounter something that doesn't fit our brain's predictions, it creates a state of uncertainty that can lead to awe. This uncertainty, while potentially uncomfortable, is essential for learning and adaptation. He describes what he calls "delicious uncertainty"—a state where we're confronted with something that challenges our understanding but in a way that feels safe enough to explore. This ties into his broader work on how the brain processes novel information and adapts to uncertainty. I echo his sentiment in my happiness series with a call to constantly challenge—without being overwhelmed or overwhelming—coupled with a growth mindset and positive attitude.

Lotto also emphasizes how context shapes whether we experience awe as positive or negative. The same phenomenon (like vast height) can trigger either terror or wonder depending on the context and our perceived security. He sees awe as fundamentally linked to our capacity for innovation and adaptation, arguing that it helps break down rigid mental models (like Keltner's "accommodation") and creates space for new understanding. Lotto looked at the performance of Cirque du Soleil's iconic and awe-inducing "O" in Las Vegas, which I unfortunately missed as it was sold out when I went. His research examined people's awe before, during, and after the extraordinary performance. The circus, like rollercoasters or scary movies, can challenge what is humanly possible with some level of psychological safety. In this case, it can be in the form of a safety net. The "S" in CSW of the last chapter.

Lotto's finding suggests that the prefrontal cortex (PFC) or executive control network (ECN) responsible for executive function and attentional control is being downregulated during awe states and the DMN increases activity! This finding is the opposite of other findings although we will see there are important nuances. It is more of a dynamic awareness (4As) of self integrating the world. In Lotto's words: "the prefrontal cortex went down, but their default mode network increased. So it's as if they felt more conscious and aware of their thinking about their place in the world. And then shortly after that, their prefrontal cortex became more active in a particular asymmetrical way that was correlated with wanting to step forward into the world. So it's as if you're thinking, and you're thinking about your identity, how you're connected to the world and now you want to step forward into it."³³

More precisely, this ECN asymmetry suggests that there is an increase in big picture thinking, risk-taking and openness to experience and ideas. The DMN is also geared towards imagination, creative thinking (7Cs), and connection (7Cs) to others. Awe does not simply increase the self (ego) part of the DMN. Instead of "ego death", which occurs when the DMN is decreased to almost dormant, it could be conceptualized as "ego rebirth" or "ego in relation to all". This leads to prosocial or altruistic thoughts and behaviors. Perhaps more importantly, people in awe have less need for cognitive control or closure and are thus more comfortable with uncertainty. We saw in *Beyond Happy* that embracing uncertainty is a philosophical key to happiness, as well as growth. This translates to a form of courage (7Cs) and resilience. People in awe seek more risk and are also more capable of experiencing it. They are aware of the fear, but awe helps them go beyond it and reap its benefits with less discomfort or mental suffering. As photographer Duane Michals puts it "it gives us the courage to overcome our cowardice." It also showcases the subtleties still left to elucidate in our brain networks. AMEN!

³³ Stickler, Daniel. (2022) Perception - Beau Lotto, Ph.D. - Neuroscience. Collective Insights podcast. Qualia. June 6, 2022

Awe can be induced by art and other sources as we will see later in the chapter. A study shows that this awe can mitigate conflict with a more flexible mindset. Awe can be used as a strategy to enter conflict with humility and a willingness to understand others, rather than reacting with anger or hate. This approach can help in mitigating negative emotions and fostering a more constructive dialogue. It is also a tool for adaptability as (non-deadly) conflict is a crucial time for practicing malleability, as it is the only place where our brains can truly evolve. By entering conflict with awe, individuals can foster an environment of growth and learning.

Lastly, awe experiences change the narrative self and redefine the self with positive stories and identity. People who experience awe increase their perception of their ability and capacity to experience awe in the future. Although awe increases part of the DMN linked to imagination and redefines the stories of self—including the past—with imagination. It seems to only decrease the DMN region linked with ego and self-importance, thus allowing for “spirituality”, “universality” or the concept of things “bigger than us”. It is not quite “ego death”, but perhaps “ego quiet”, which “enables us to move forward,” as Joseph Campbell remarks.

Awe gives us increased curiosity (7Cs) and courage (7Cs) instead of comfort and cowardice. It decreases the need for certainty and increase embracing uncertainty. Who doesn’t love a pleasant surprise? In *Beyond Happy*, I explained at length how both our innate negativity bias and unconscious overpowering of our narrative self (versus our experiential self) constantly affect our subjective happiness, making us much more unhappy than we should. Awe seems to give us the tools to have less selfish and negative stories (narrative self), while at the same time more amazing and transcending experiences (experiential self). This reshapes our perceived past, present and future with possibilities and positivity (8Ps).

Positive Awe = Better Stories (Selfless Narratives) + Better Experiences

You can never go back and change what happened to you. But what you can do is change the meaning of what happened to you.

—Beau Lotto

Money and Awe

Awe increases the focus on the quality of experience—imagination, aesthetics/beauty and senses—and decreases the focus on money and material possessions or goals. Paradoxically, one may think that because money may theoretically allow us to experience more travel, better food, art and have more leisure and less financial stress, it should be correlated with awe. A large sample of over 1500 Americans examined the association between social class (household income) and self-reported tendencies to experience 7 distinct positive emotions that are core to happiness: amusement, awe (4As), compassion (7Cs), contentment (7Cs), enthusiasm (12Es), love, and pride. Higher income was associated with greater self-oriented feelings of contentment and pride, and with greater amusement. Amusement will be part of the 9 Anchors and is linked to playfulness (8Ps). More money, more play? Perhaps. Let’s see...

Lower social class (less income) was associated with more other-oriented feelings of compassion and love, and with greater awe. Ah! More money, more self-play, then! Tell adults to also play with their neighbors and experience more awe.

More Money = More Ego + (Self-)Amusement + Contentment (7Cs)

Less Money = More Awe (4As) + Love + Compassion (7Cs)

In the study, there were no significant differences in enthusiasm³⁴. We will see in *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention!* how love can be addictive and dangerous, and compassion, kindness and admiration are favored. As for the self-oriented emotion of pride, it is ego-based, and we can prefer confidence and contentment. We should note that people with less money may need to form deeper connections (7Cs) and bonds with others as they may be less self-sufficient. Survival may be a mitigating factor for the need for “other focus” as there seems to be a theoretical bidirectional causality to some extent.

However, we have already seen that awe reduces self-centeredness and pushes us to look at others and the universal. People with more money may have the tendency to be more selfish and take things for granted or become blasé—finding things uninteresting or monotonous because of frequent exposure. Money or access to more resources can reduce stress—including increase (self-) contentment—and is in general desirable to a certain extent yet one should be aware of its drawbacks including the reduced propensity to find awe. Luckily, awe can be cultivated—even if you happen to be filthy rich. *¡Asquerosamente rico! (no sucio rico o rio sucio)*

Languages can be awesome, free and freeing. We can find awe in learning languages, new words (mellifluous is my favorite!), writing, reading or hearing poetry. Literature can lift your appreciation towards awe. Awe can often also transcend languages. Awe leaves us struggling to find the right words to describe our experience. It's as if language itself falls short when trying to capture the enormity of what we're feeling. A loss for words or onomatopoeia like “wow” and “ah”.

Sobrecogimiento is the closest Spanish word for awe. Its word roots would make it over (*sobre*) catching (*cogimiento*). This would mean something more than you can take, get, grab or understand at first. An experience you cannot hold or grab a hold to immediately and forces you to reevaluate. *Coger* in Latin means forced while *cogni* means to know. Forced to know? *Coger* in Spanish also has another colloquial use and translation but that is for another awe-filled day of learning.

Aspirational Awe and Motivation

We saw above that awe helps learning in many ways. When you learn or want motivation for a task or action, it is useful to have passion (8Ps) for the material or activity. If we cannot conjure specific liking, love, or in the best-case awe, for something, it is useful to have a greater aspiration or motivational goal. For example, doing weights or hard exercises may feel painful more than joyful at a given moment, yet the higher reasons for doing this may be health, beauty or simply pushing our limits. Any or all of these (elevated) aspirations can provide purpose (8Ps) and motivation in mental or physical adversity to increase perseverance (8Ps) and learning.

Aspirational Goal = Purpose (8Ps) = Perseverance (8Ps) + Passion (8Ps) = Performance + Happiness

Awe can provide inspiration and aspiration. With perseverance we can build better strategies to continue to learn and grow—awe can add additional curiosity (7Cs) and creativity (7Cs). Having awe, not only for the specifics but for the whole allows for awakening to greater available happiness. Mental zooming, big picture thinking, overarching goal setting and reviewing, and clear purpose, all add to aspirations. In an organisational setting, a clear vision and mission are crucial for optimum motivation, learning, collaboration, conflict-resolution, individual and team performances benefit. Clarity (11Cs) and coherence (11Cs) matter in aspirational awe.

³⁴ Piff PK, Moskowitz JP. Wealth, poverty, and happiness: Social class is differentially associated with positive emotions. *Emotion*. 2018 Sep;18(6):902-905. doi: 10.1037/emo0000387. Epub 2017 Dec 18. PMID: 29251946.

For studying in school or in life, we can also use self-testing periodically in the process to activate the curiosity loop, learn optimally and maintain the beginner's mind. Self-testing is a form of challenge and can be in various forms, including social like in study groups. Cue cards or friendly competition helps individual and shared learning by increasing motivation. I used to write extensive notes during my undergraduate degree and reviewed my knowledge with two study partners often. At home, however, I started to get less motivation studying alone late in the night. At one point I was tired of talking to myself so would ask my mother to listen to my understanding of physiology, neuroanatomy or microbiology. It helped that she was listening, even if she did not understand all the subtleties—or that she was half asleep at 3am (thanks mom). My son learned all the 200 or so countries of the world by age five and did a lot of self-testing with me on the world map we had. It was a fun competition a few times a week, and he increased the number of countries until he knew them all. Later he tested his knowledge with board games and online geography games. He maintained his knowledge by testing and learned more, including flags, capitals, official currency and languages. His aspirational awe was to be familiar with the wonderful planet we lived in. More on world culture and awe below. My aspirational awe was to understand the intricacies of our amazing human body.

Self-testing is more effective than reviewing the same material repeatedly. Reviewing the same material also creates an illusionary confidence of expertise and mastery of the material.

— Huberman Lab Podcast, Optimal Protocol for Studying & Learning

Awe in the World: Cultural Learnings

Many native and indigenous cultures maintain practices that cultivate wonder like vision quests, sky watching, animal tracking, and plant medicine knowledge (see ayahuasca in section below). Pacific Island and Indigenous traditions around the world offer profound perspectives on awe that are deeply rooted in relationship with land, ancestors, and the cosmos. These worldviews often emphasize connection (7Cs) rather than separation when experiencing wonder.

In many Pacific Island cultures, awe is intimately connected to "mana" (like in Magic the Gathering popular card game)—a spiritual force or power that permeates people, places, and objects. This isn't simply reverence from a distance but recognition of being part of an interconnected spiritual ecosystem.

Hawaiian traditions speak of "kākou" (inclusiveness) where awe emerges from recognizing oneself as part of, rather than apart from, the sources of wonder. The concept of "pono" (righteousness/balance) creates a framework where proper relationship with awesome forces is emphasized. Māori culture in New Zealand centers around concepts like "whakapapa" (genealogy) that connect people directly to awesome natural phenomena. Mountains, rivers, and stars aren't simply objects of wonder but actual ancestors and relations. The impressive Māori ceremonial dance, called haka is a performance art, often performed by a group, with vigorous movements and stamping of the feet with rhythmically shouted accompaniment and can provoke the collective effervescence aspect of awe. The Samoan concept of "va" (the space between) emphasizes that awe exists in relationships rather than isolated experiences—it's found in the connections between people, nature, and the divine. We see the strong theme of connection and going beyond the self.

Globally, for many Indigenous peoples, awe is inseparable from relationship with the land. The Aboriginal Australian concept of "Dreaming" or "Dreamtime" provides a framework where awe emerges from recognition of one's place in ongoing creation stories—again positive stories. Wonder isn't separate

from daily life but woven into understanding of the land. Many Native American traditions emphasize gratitude as the appropriate response to awe. The Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Thanksgiving Address, for example, acknowledges every element of creation from the people to the stars, expressing thanks for each. This also touches appreciation (4As) and another positive synergetic loop of awe-appreciation.

Andean Indigenous traditions speak of "ayni" (reciprocity) where awe involves recognizing mutual obligation between humans and the sources of wonder. Mountains (apus) aren't simply inspiring landscapes but beings with whom one maintains relationship. Some common elements of awe include: integration of wonder with responsibility and relationship; recognition of kinship with the sources of awe rather than separation; emphasis on reciprocity rather than consumption of experience; communal rather than purely individual frameworks for understanding transcendent moments; continuity between everyday life and extraordinary experience. These perspectives offer valuable counterpoints to more individualistic or consumption-oriented approaches to awe found in some contemporary contexts, especially in the West as we will see.

Eastern traditions emphasize, mindful observation, present-moment (8Ps) awareness (4As), recognition of interconnectedness (7Cs), oneness and appreciation (4As) of impermanence. In Buddhism, awe is often connected to the experience of impermanence (anicca) and emptiness (śūnyatā). The profound recognition of the transient nature of all phenomena can evoke a sense of wonder that transcends ordinary perception. This isn't merely an emotional response but a gateway to deeper wisdom or awareness (4As).

The Japanese concept of "yūgen" (幽玄) captures a mysterious sense of the profound beauty and impermanence of the universe—a subtle, contemplative awe that sees beyond surface appearances. In Daoist thought, awe emerges from contemplating the mysterious Dao that cannot be fully grasped. The Dao De Jing begins by acknowledging the ineffable nature of ultimate reality: "The Dao that can be told is not the eternal Dao." This tradition emphasizes how genuine awe often arises from simplicity rather than grandeur—the wonder found in observing natural processes and embracing wu-wei (non-action). Hindu traditions speak of "vismaya" (विस्मय), a Sanskrit term for wonder or amazement that can arise from contemplating the divine. The Bhagavad Gita describes Arjuna's awe upon seeing Krishna's universal form (Vishvarupa), a moment of overwhelming cosmic revelation. The concept of "darshan" (दर्शन)—seeing and being seen by the divine—creates a reciprocal relationship where awe becomes a form of connection rather than mere distance or separation.

Although often focused on social ethics, Confucian tradition recognizes awe as an appropriate response to moral exemplars and to the rituals that maintain cosmic order. The concept of "jing" (敬) combines respect, reverence, and attentiveness that acknowledges something greater than oneself. Common themes from Buddhism to Confucianism emphasize receptivity rather than conquest. It connects individual experience to universal principles. It views awe as a pathway to wisdom rather than merely an emotional state. It also integrates awe into daily practice rather than reserving it for extraordinary moments.

Not all awe is positive in the East and the Chinese term for awe, 敬畏, is a combination of respect and fear. In the Middle East, Islamic and Arab concepts of awe include "Khashya" (خشية) represents a profound, reverential awe that combines fear—more on negative awe shortly—and knowledge, particularly of the supreme, ethereal and eternal. "Hayba" (هيبة) describes a majestic form of awe that commands respect "Jalal" (جلال) represents heavenly majesty and might that inspire awe. The concept of "Taqwa" (تقوى) combines God-consciousness with awe-inspired mindfulness. The shared emphasis on

submission to divine power, spiritual hierarchies inspiring different forms of awe and a common thread of mediators between human and divine (saints in Islam) will be seen in other cultures below.

In Persian traditions (Iran, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan), the Sufi concept of "hey'rât" (حیرت) describes a mystical amazement or wonderment. Persian poetry, especially works by Rumi and Hafez, often explores "shekuh" (شکوه)—a form of awe that encompasses both grandeur and beauty. "Azamat" (عظمت) represents overwhelming magnificence that inspires awe.

The concepts of awe across Western and African cultural contexts contrast significantly. This comparison reveals deep differences in how societies understand and experience this profound emotion and mindset. In Western cultures, awe has often been conceptualized individually—a person confronting something vast or sublime as we saw. This view was heavily influenced by Enlightenment philosophers like Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, who framed awe as an individual psychological experience combining fear and wonder. African cultures diverge in this sense, often understanding awe through a more communal and ancestral lens. In many African traditions, awe is deeply woven into social relationships and spiritual connections.

In most African cultures, the usual understanding of the sacred and awe-inspiring is deeply tied to community. It's not just about individual feeling, but about recognizing one's place in an interconnected web of relationships spanning the visible and spiritual worlds—perhaps more like *agape* as we will see later in the chapter. In Eastern Africa, among the Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania, awe is deeply connected to their relationship with "Engai" (God) and is expressed through right of passage ceremonies like the Eunoto, where young warriors transition to senior status. I had the opportunity to witness the ancient land diving ritual on Pentecost Island, Vanuatu. This centuries-old practice caught Western attention in the 20th century, inspiring the modern sport of bungee jumping. I tried bungee jumping three times in New Zealand and can tell you it 100% provokes awe—as well as some fear or terror!

In Ethiopian Orthodox traditions, the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela evoke profound awe, combining architectural marvel with deep spiritual significance. This reminds me of the awe I felt seeing the rock fortress in Sigiriya, Sri Lanka, which was also used as a Buddhist monastery. Architecture, art (beautiful cave frescos of nymphs), nature and spirituality all in one! Sacred groves in various African cultures embody this different approach to awe. While Western visitors might focus on the natural or artistic beauty, local communities often experience these spaces through layers of cultural memory, ritual significance, and collective spiritual presence (8Ps).

In Central Africa, the Luba people of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have traditionally experienced collective awe through the "bulopwe" (royal sacred power) concept, where leadership embodies both political and spiritual authority. Among the Fang people (Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea), the "Bwiti" spiritual tradition involves experiences of awe through ritual ceremonies and forest initiations (nature). My friend's father from Cameroon still hunts the Gorillas in protected sacred grounds. It may take two to three years to kill one, so patience (8Ps) and perseverance (8Ps) are required. It is social and spiritual endeavour more than a sport. Chasing the massive and dangerous ape with wit, skill and respect in small groups is a form of courage (7Cs) that produce collective awe (4As).

In Southern Africa, the San people's relationship with trance dance ceremonies creates communal experiences of awe, connecting the physical and spiritual worlds. For the Zulu, the concept of "ukuhlonipha" (respect/reverence) extends beyond human relationships to include ancestral spirits and sacred places. In North Africa, Egyptian Coptic traditions, the Desert Fathers' spiritual practices created a tradition of awe through ascetic contemplation. Moroccan Sufism, particularly in cities like Fez, cultivates awe through dhikr ceremonies and sacred music.

Although music, dance and nature seem shared sources of awe, Western expressions often emphasize the exceptional and extraordinary—musical mastery, mountain peaks, vast canyons, or scientific discoveries. African expressions of awe frequently find the extraordinary within the ordinary—simpler but no less meaningful dance and music, the ancestral presence in daily life, the spiritual significance of community gatherings, or the sacred potential in seemingly mundane spaces. I argue that building the ability to experience awe in both the grand and unexpected, as well as the small and habitual would open more possibilities for all cultures to experience more awe.

Another particularly interesting contrast is in how these cultures relate awe to knowledge. Western traditions often link awe to the unknown or unexplainable. Many African traditions instead find awe in accumulated wisdom and knowledge—the deep understanding held by elders or the complex interconnections between community, nature, and spirit.

I find the intersection of these different cultural approaches especially fascinating and opportunities to deepen our understanding of awe from new perspectives. The concept of "awe" in Yoruba (a folk philosophy with tribes in Western Africa) is not directly translatable but it can be understood in the context of reverence and fear. The closest translation (as per Glosbe dictionary) is "èrùipàyàìjáyà," which means "awe, fear, or dread." This term captures the feeling of reverence and fear that one might experience in the presence of something grand or divine. Òrìṣà worship (their traditional deities), ancestral veneration (the concept of "Egungun"), religious rituals and ceremonies, and the sacred position of traditional rulers (Obas) can induce collective effervescent awe. It captures a sense of reverential awe. It is linked to ancestral wisdom and community elders. It connects to their deep spiritual and hierarchical social structure, which is in essence negative awe associated with fear.

In Voodoo (Vodun) culture and complex sophisticated belief system spanning Africa and the Americas, which my uncle is a world expert in, positive manifestations may include reverence for the Lwa (spirits) as beneficial forces that maintain cosmic balance. "Dessounin" ceremonies that celebrate the separation of soul from body, are regarded with sacred awe. The profound respect for "Asogwe" (high priest or priestess like my uncle's deceased wife) who can channel divine powers demand reverential respect and awe. The complicated and challenging aspects of awe as in any worship is the potential of abuse. This can be the same for celebrity worship, preachers or politicians preying on people's psychology. In voodoo, "Petwo" spirits, considered both powerful and potentially dangerous, inspiring a different kind of awe. "Baka" spirits embody both protective and destructive forces. The concept of "zonbi" (not a zombie apocalypse on your TV), represents not horror but the awesome power over life and death—which we know is linked to awe.

The fascinating aspect is how these traditions often share understanding of awe as a complex emotion that can't be simply categorized as positive or negative. It's seen as a necessary force for growth (spiritual or scientific). It can also facilitate increased reverence, appreciation (4As) or understanding.

Negative Awe

Awe can however be frightening if not coupled with courage (7Cs) and appreciation (4As). Awe which is still tied to ego identity and need for certainty and security can be dreadful and be perceived as negative. Negative awe is an overwhelming feeling of fear, menace, or insignificance in response to vast or powerful stimuli (external or internal). While positive awe makes us feel elevated and connected, negative awe makes us feel small and threatened. Roughly one fifth of awe experiences are tinged with fear as per University of Toronto research. These variations of awe which may be more culturally prone in some instances, as we saw in the previous section. In some social psychology studies, threat-based awe experiences were viewed as have lower subjective self-control and certainty over the situation than other

awe experiences and were characterized by greater feelings of fear³⁵. This can be linked to Norenzayan's theory of the need for omniscient watchful and punitive Gods or feeling overwhelmed by the apparently random life events we perceived a significant and not in our self interest (ego). We saw in chapter 2, that the universe does not care about you, so do not to judge and accept—and you shall find only positive awe. If we don't, our awe or can be tainted with negativity mentally and physically and turn to terror. Negative awe activates the stress fight/flight/freeze response, while positive awe the assured calm—but excited and alive—response as we saw. Pure terror can lead to overwhelm, freeze and nervous system dysregulation—often called trauma.

Physical manifestations of negative awe, horror or dread include cold shiver and shudder while positive awe is more tingling sensations like sensitivity (think orgasm) or goosebumps (as we will see below) and perhaps more located in the arms/shoulder/neck/head (top) region.

Examples of negative awe include witnessing a destructive natural disaster like a tornado or tsunami; deep alienation or isolation feelings; standing at the edge of an extremely high cliff feeling vertigo—yes, that is how I felt when I did bungee but compensated and eventually jumped to bring courage (7Cs) to an otherwise useful and natural bodily response to falling to one's death; viewing graphic footage of war or violence; being in the presence of someone with perceived power over your life; fearing the wrath of God or a spiritual entity; contemplating the vastness of space and feeling existential dread because of lack of purpose (8Ps). Sometimes an experience can provoke both positive and negative awe at the same time like bungee jumping or existential crisis stargazing. One could feel smallness compared to the stars as a perturbing and profound lack of control and meaning, as well as an incredibly eye-opening perspective shift that gives you a tingling feeling and grateful goosebumps.

The science behind transforming negative to positive awe involves several key psychological mechanisms:

1. **Cognitive Reappraisal:** When we reframe threatening stimuli through a lens of appreciation (4As) or learning, we can shift our emotional response. For instance, viewing a powerful politician or boss who can make your life miserable with compersion (7Cs) and compassion (7Cs). Yes, mean megalomaniacs usually suffer even more than the average person. Their external ego manifestations often mask grave suffering, dissatisfactions and insecurities.
2. **Physical/Psychological Distance:** Research shows that creating literal or metaphorical distance from the awe-inducing stimulus can help transform the experience. This is why viewing natural disasters from a safe distance or through media can elicit positive rather than negative awe. Same goes for watching a scary movie where we subconsciously know the danger is not real or riding a rollercoaster in relative safety. Remember that risk produces awe. Perceived or visceral risk in cognitive and objective safety has been a combination to assure awe is more positive than negative. We can better appreciate risk's raw power rather than feel threatened by it.
3. **Acceptance (4As):** Chapter 2 showed us how to readily accept anything and foster equanimity and nonjudgement. If we can accept everything, including lack of control, lack of complete understanding, uncertainty and certain death, awe should never be negative. We can simply enjoy the show in real life, understanding our lives are like a horror film, not exactly as real as our ego want us to belief. Just another story. Make the story a romantic comedy if you want. Awareness (4As) can help us accept this fundamental fact of existence and allow us to experience only positive awe with courage (7Cs).
4. **Knowledge Building:** Understanding the science or mechanisms behind awesome phenomena can help transform fear into fascination. Positive awe may not need further

³⁵ Gordon, A., Anderson, C., McNeil, G., Loew, D., Keltner, D. (2016). The Dark Side of the Sublime: Distinguishing a Threat-Based Variant of Awe. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 113. 10.1037/pspp0000120.

explanation as we saw, but negative awe can be diminished with deep curiosity (7Cs). Learning about how tornadoes form or how disease actually propagates can make these phenomena feel less threatening and more remarkable. In some cases, additional knowledge perceived as negative can increase the dread and negative awe—like learning about the depth of political corruption and its effect on your life. In these cases, use the three techniques above or use creativity (7Cs) to find a new one and feel free to tell about it—see, I am genuinely curious!

We see then how the Four Aces work in synergy. Awareness, acceptance and appreciation are all factors for positive awe. Additional practical techniques to transform negative to positive awe include:

1. Practice Safe Exposure
 - View powerful phenomena from protected vantage points
 - Use virtual reality or documentaries to experience threatening events safely
 - Start with smaller exposures and gradually work up to more intense experiences
2. Use Mindfulness Techniques
 - Focus on your breath when feeling overwhelmed (a hallmark of awe)
 - Notice physical sensations without judgment
 - Practice grounding exercises to maintain a sense of stability
3. Apply Knowledge
 - Study the science behind what awes you
 - Learn about safety measures and protective factors
 - Understand historical contexts and patterns—the bigger the picture, the smaller the problem (situation) becomes!
4. Shift Perspective
 - Consider the role of awesome forces in maintaining Earth's and the Universe's systems
 - Reflect on how powerful phenomena have shaped human development
 - Look for beauty in power (like the eye of a hurricane, or the charisma in a dictator)
In a thunderstorm, see the structure of a thunderhead, the rapid criss-crossing and brightness of lightning, and the low rumble of thunder. There is positive awe available in any negative awe experience.
5. Connect (7Cs) with Others
 - Share experiences with others who have similar interests
 - Join guided tours or educational programs about awesome phenomena
 - Participate in citizen science projects related to natural events
 - Find collective effervescence while lessening your fears

The main neurological basis for this transformation involves the amygdala (fear center) and the prefrontal cortex (reasoning center). When we consciously engage our prefrontal cortex through learning and reappraisal, we can modulate the amygdala's fear response, allowing us to experience awe more positively.

Research has shown that individuals who successfully transform negative awe into positive awe often experience:

- Increased feelings of connection (7Cs) to the world around them
- Enhanced creativity (7Cs) and problem-solving abilities
- Greater emotional resilience (equanimity)
- Improved ability to handle uncertainty—acceptance (4As)
- Deeper appreciation (4As) for life's complexities

Understanding and transforming negative awe can be particularly valuable for people working in fields like emergency response, astronomy, or geological studies, where encounters with awesome and potentially threatening phenomena are more common

Awe, Poetry and Peace

Awe happens when we marvel at something that stretches our understanding. Astronauts who see the Earth in its entirety from above report profound experiences and is now known as the “overview effect”. Here is a poetic rendition of the experience.

In this moment of crystalline clarity,
I am struck breathless by our delicate dance—
Humans, animals, plants on a marble of blue,
Spinning through the cosmic expanse.
In this vision of unity complete,
Time seems to pause and bend,
As I glimpse the truth that binds us all—
Where I end, you begin.
This blue oasis in endless black expanse,
A miracle beyond compare,
Makes my heart expand past breaking point
With wonder beyond rare.
For in this moment of seeing whole
The vastness and the small,
I am lost and found and broken through
To admiration that conquers all.
Here suspended between stars and earth,
In awe's eternal space,
I finally grasp with trembling breath
Our collective state of grace.
For we are one, yet we are many,
Fragile, yet so strong,
Each playing our part in this cosmic symphony,
All where we belong.
And in this truth that breaks and heals,
This vision crystal-clear,
I find myself dissolved at last
Into all that's far and near.

As we saw, awe produces increased creativity (7Cs) and awareness (4As) and in this case a visual cue produces a perspective change that have marked minds in a transformative way. It is a shift in consciousness and clarity (11Cs). Carl Sagan’s book and movie *Contact* lament that a space voyage should send a poet rather than a scientist.

Jonah Paquette is another awe psychology researcher and notes that awe can, similarly, increase creativity (7Cs), critical thinking and problem-solving skills as well as:

1. Reduce symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress
2. Reduce symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder
3. Reduce rate of chronic inflammation (like appreciation) by regulating cytokines
4. Increase feelings of connection (7Cs) and compassion (7Cs) by increasing oxytocin

The cytokine findings are especially interesting. It has shown that during awe experiences, the body releases lower levels of cytokines (inflammatory proteins), suggesting that awe can also affect us on a physiological level, potentially reducing stress and boosting immune function. More specifically, inflammatory interleukin-6 (IL-6) protein was reduced significantly and predicted for four particular emotions: awe (4As), joy, contentment (7Cs) and pride. The strongest relation of reduced inflammation was with awe! Three other positive (8Ps) emotions (amusement, compassion and the elusive love) had no significant correlation in Stellar's second study, but these seven "positive" emotions seem to have some general effect in reducing inflammation—the root cause of more and more illness we are finding out—in her first study, with awe being the best for your health in that regard. And yes, I would not suggest negative awe for too long to anyone's happiness menu, although if transient, it can be transformative. I do not believe in the Greek proverb, *pathemata mathemata* (literally, "things suffered, things learned") or the necessity for suffering for anything. The Stoics had it better. I do know that awareness is the 1st Ace for a reason and if you cannot grasp it with logic or accept it, awe may be a key to increased awareness. The question remains if your ego will make that awareness through suffering and resistance or acceptance and awe.

Awe-inspiring moments are all around us, yet we forget to pay attention to them—more on attention in *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention!* If we have curiosity (7Cs), we can see that everything around us is miraculous. From our technology that did not exist 50 or 10 years ago, to rocks which may be millions of years old. In fact, our very existence is an unfathomable miracle. What are the odds of us been alive at all? If every day is a miracle, awe is omnipresent and permeates our lives if we choose to see it that way and remember to. Awe also encourages community integration, curiosity (7Cs), purpose (8Ps), prosocial actions and sacrifice for the group according to Keltner's research. Is awe good for war, then? Apparently. "Shock and awe" is a military tactic and group sacrifice is the name of the game called war. Ah well, awe isn't perfect. Still, we can perform better sacrifices than suicide bombs, sacrificial virgins for spiritual beliefs or battlefield bravado for military ego. A good reflection on the subject can be found in Naomi Klein's 2007 and 2009 documentaries and source book *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. Awe can be linked to terror and fear as we saw above. Meanwhile, back to peace (8Ps), positivity (8Ps) and beauty. Contentment (7Cs) can come by capturing the fleeting beauty of awe in simple joys. Remember Persian poet, Rumi. Here is what he had to say: "*The morning wind spreads its fresh smell. We must get up and take that in, that wind that lets us live. Breathe before it's gone.*"

Noticing the small miracles is our duty—hopefully not tour of duty or Call of Duty. We can seek these wonders out and be open to them. Something as easy as the connections with people, watching sunsets, nature, music, reading—what you are doing now—, writing or other. I personally love to soak in the stars in a dark night away from city lights and feel small contemplating the gorgeousness and grandiosity of galaxies upon galaxies. Awe is beyond beauty and touches the sublime and sacred. Vastness and things beyond your intuitive understanding can produce awe, including imposing or cute animals or accomplished athletes. A city or forest walk can induce awe. Be amazed and astonished anew.

Even the infinitely gentle rustle of the withered grasses at my feet. Each was expressing itself in its own way,—singing its own song, and making its own peculiar gestures—manifesting a richness of variety to be found in no other forest I have yet seen.

— John Muir, The Mountains of California

A forest is fascinating! We now know that trees and plants share nutrients through their root systems and the soil. More surprisingly, trees can communicate with each other through a network of fungi known as mycorrhizae. This "wood wide web" allows trees to share resources and even warn each other of dangers like pests. This is rather awesome.

The overview effect may be even more of a sure-shot shortcut to awaken your awe. Going to space may still be far-fetched to witness it first hand and hard work. Being an astronaut is hard work and a space tourist still unaffordable for most. I spoke to a few astronauts in person, and they all told me the experience changed them positively. They felt more connection (7Cs) and purpose (8Ps) from the awe (4As). "Astronauts" are almost superhumans and may inspire awe, themselves, being multitasking, dedicated, perseverant (8Ps), courageous (7Cs), highly skilled and immensely gifted. Exponential awe and awe everywhere.

If everyone had the chance to go to space, I am certain that there would be more peace (8Ps). The same goes for traveling the world with open mind, curiosity (7Cs), compassion (7Cs) and making real connections (7Cs). Why would you want to go to war with, mistreat or abuse your friends? I have Georgians, Ukrainian and Russians friends, Israeli Jews and Palestinians, Armenians and Azerbaijanis, Pakistanis and Indians, Iranians, Yemenis, and Saudis...

We may not have the opportunity to go to space any time soon—even with Elon—, yet we can cultivate awe right here on Earth, in our mundane and miraculous lives. One way to do so is to cultivate a beginner's mind. Where to begin?

Cultivating Beginner's Mind

We've learned that awe can be a practice, set as an attitude and a mindset. There are many ways to pursue a beginner's mind—a pathway to more awe (4As) and curiosity (7Cs). Here are 5 that come to mind:

1. Clear your mind: Before approaching a new situation or study, try emptying your mind of previous judgments or conceptions of the coming experience or topic you'll be exploring. You can do this with light meditation, micro-mindfulness or breath work (eyes closed or not). For applied work or study, you can alternatively dim the lights and play soothing music for a moment or take a bath before you approach your productive time with a newfound freshness. Cold bath or shower challenge for the AMEN masters!

2. Observe how children approach new activities: If you have younger relatives or friends with small children, watch how they engage in new activities, whether it's biking, building a fort, sandcastles, treehouses or Legos. Watch for the innumerable firsts—feeding, food, fall, sitting, step, poop, puke, bath, babysitter, bully, birthday—and the daily repetitions until competency or perfection. You do not have to keep that awful first drawing but do take a good look at it to make it "awe full". Practice patience (8Ps) and presence (8Ps). A wide-eyed approach can be freeing and offer a new perspective that steers clear of cynicism or (ego-identity) expertise.

3. Let go of your ego: The beginner's mind is a humbling exercise; it necessitates clearing your mind of any preconceived knowledge that may color your experience. Ask questions and find comfort in not having all the right answers. Maintain curiosity (7Cs) even when you navigate with near certainty. Enjoy the long ride as opposed to the sprint toward immediate clarity.

4. Engage creativity (7Cs): Instead of operating on autopilot, question why certain tasks are completed in the ways you've normally done them. Shake up routines and lead from a place of inquiry not "in a hurry". Create with courage (7Cs).

5. Go one step at a time: The beginner's mind rewards slowness, so there is no need to rush to the next stage or level of your journey when learning a new skill or studying a particular field. Stay in the present (8Ps) moment as opposed to constantly planning with expectations and anxiogenic anticipation.

A beginner's mind can also be described as looking at the world with fresh eyes. Technically, most people blink between 14 000 and 20 000 times each day, meaning thousands of brand-new eyes. See like you've never seen. Pay attention like you know nothing.

Listen like you never heard. My dad is in his eighties and the whole family has heard some of his favorite stories over a hundred times each, and I am not even exaggerating. I can tell you some myself from memory with decades of active listening and emotional encoding. I know the stories, and the crowd of people can even be similar or the same, but each time he tells them, it is like the first—to him at least. The listeners can also tune in to the same “new” frequency if they wish, instead of rushing ahead to the known conclusion aloud or in their head. Listen, laugh and learn—not the words, but all the magical nonverbal newness to discover.

Similarly, my father must have told me the same children story many times in my early youth. Was I just easy to please then? As a teenager he bought a special book named *Les contes japonais* (Japanese Tales) to have longer and different foreign stories to spark the awe and imagination in my brother and me. Changing cultures or languages can help bring you back to the basic. Use your weakest language or weakest hand and “be” a beginner. More challenges ahead. AMEN.

Awe Variability and Cultivating Awe Challenge

People feel awe on average twice a week or only 100 times a year. The variability is large however and some do not experience awe in weeks while others have awe moments a dozen times a day, even when doing the dishes. Some genetic may predispose people to be more awe-sensitive—like openness to experience—, yet it can be trained at whatever baseline level you are. I challenge you to feel awe at least daily and be instantly happier.

A key gene linked to serotonin and happiness is the 5-HTTLPR gene. This gene is responsible for producing a type of serotonin transporter, which plays a crucial role in regulating serotonin levels in the brain. Variations in the 5-HTTLPR gene can affect how efficiently serotonin is transported, influencing mood, well-being, joy, contentment (7Cs) and overall happiness. People with the GG genotype are found to have higher levels of serotonin and be happier³⁶. Another important gene is the Cannabinoid Receptor 1 (CNR1) gene, which is involved in the endocannabinoid system and affects how we process rewards and positive emotions, like awe. Variations in this gene can impact the release of dopamine, another neurotransmitter associated with feelings of pleasure and happiness. The cytosine allele (CA) carriers are happier than the thymine-thymine (TT) carriers³⁷. These genetic factors, along with environmental influences, contribute to an individual's baseline level of happiness and their ability to experience positive emotions.

Craig Anderson's finding on the neurophysiology of awe reveals that Dopamine D4 Receptor Gene (DRD4) gene allele is linked to greater exploration, curiosity (7Cs) and awe (4As). This gene mutation affects motivation dopamine system which awe activates. 2R and 7R variations (or alleles) increase

³⁶ Beevers, C. G., Wells, T. T., Ellis, A. J., & McGeary, J. E. (2009). Association of the serotonin transporter gene promoter region (5-HTTLPR) polymorphism with biased attention for emotional stimuli. *Journal of abnormal psychology*, 118(3), 670–681. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016198>

³⁷ Matsunaga, M., et al. (2014). Genetic Variations in the Human Cannabinoid Receptor Gene Are Associated with Happiness. *PLOS ONE*. doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0093771

dopamine, which is great for awe, but everything has pros and cons. It is also linked with financial risk-taking and potential heavy drinking. Kitayama's research surprisingly shows that DRD4 genetic plays a role in modulating cultural learning too. In the study, Westerners were more independent, and Asians more interdependent compared to non-allele holders³⁸. Academic and cultural learning may be linked to curiosity instead of potential conformity. Knowing that some people experience more awe naturally does not mean it cannot be trained, practiced and enhanced.

Here are 10 meaningful ways to cultivate a sense of awe in your life:

1. Spend time in nature's grandeur: Visit majestic landscapes like mountains, oceans, or forests (tropical, temperate, boreal, petrified; parks will do too). Take time to fully absorb the scale and beauty around you. Sit quietly and observe the intricate details and patterns in natural settings—your backyard or bucolic bush can provide if necessary. Stories can sometimes replace actual awe-inspiring venues. Here are my volcano stories as substitutes for now: a) Mayon is excitedly erupting in The Philippines, and hot lava descends day and night—a week of dangerous beauty and both types of awe as the city is half-evacuated b) Vanuatu's volcano is always active and a voyage in hysterical and hypnotic Hell. Mount Yasur on Tanna Island is accessible by foot and from the thunderous crater I got a nosebleed looking for and finding awe c) Whakaari (White Island) in New Zealand impressed me even before reaching the deadly active stratovolcano island which tragically killed and injured dozens a few years after my passage; my presence was peaceful and met with playful killer whales on the oceanic way to sulfuric-laced Doomsville and an awe-filled day.

2. Study the cosmos: Learn about astronomy, stargaze on clear nights, visit planetariums, buy or borrow telescopes, download cool star apps. Contemplating the vast scale of the universe and our place within it naturally evokes awe. Consider how light from distant stars has traveled for millions of years to reach your eyes. I saw five planets in alignment on a morning horizon, went to the Dark Sky Festival in Jasper, Canada, to meet amateur astronomers. Put eclipses in your calendar. Try to spot constellations, satellites, the space station and shooting stars, especially mid-August Perseids show with the naked eye. I saw a glimmer of stunning Tsuchinshan-ATLAS comet in an October night sky of 2024. I was privy to observe the immensely more spectacular Hale-Bopp in March 1997 for days at its peak approach to Earth. The magnificent celestial object was independently detected less than two years prior by two amateur astronomers, Alan Hale and Thomas Bopp. At the time of its discovery, Hale-Bopp was the farthest comet ever to be found by amateurs. Maybe the next could be you. Just the thought feels me with awe.

3. Immerse yourself in great art: Visit museums, attend live performances, or listen deeply to masterful music. Pay attention to works that make you feel lifted or moved beyond the ordinary. Notice how artistic genius can capture profound human experiences. Feel the rhythm instinctively. Find gripping graffiti in your hood. Notice that art gallery and enter. Appreciate architecture to an elevated state.

4. Practice mindful observation: Take time to really notice everyday wonders we often overlook—a spider's web glistening with dew, the perfect symmetry of a flower, the way light plays through leaves. Approach familiar things with fresh vantage points. When your mind wanders or is bored, challenge it to pay attention.

5. Seek out new experiences: Travel to places that expose you to different cultures, customs and ways of seeing the world. In February aim to see the Carnaval de Québec and the hotter one in Rio. See Mardi Gras in New Orleans to complete the trio. See Songkran in Thailand or better still Thingyan in

³⁸ Kitayama, S., King, A., Yoon, C., Tompson, S., Huff, S., & Liberzon, I. (2014). The Dopamine D4 Receptor Gene (DRD4) Moderates Cultural Difference in Independent Versus Interdependent Social Orientation. *Psychological Science*, 25(6), 1169-1177. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797614528338>

Myanmar around April. Put yourself in situations that expand your perspective and challenge your assumptions about what's possible. Impossible is nothing. Fill your blank passport pages and your memory bank with awe. Go to an open-mic, random event, or local cultural festival. Rediscover a passion of your youth. Find where and when they celebrate a foreign tradition in your city. I have celebrated several Colombian's *Día de Las Velas*, Indian *Holi* and *Diwali*, Persian *Nowruz*, Irish St-Patrick's Day, Mexican *Día de los Muertos*, Korean *Chuseok*, Orthodox New Year and Lunar New Year, in the same medium size city I call home. All fun-filled traditions and "collective effervescence" as we will see later. Holi produces the most awe by far if you must pick only one. Venezuelan *Día de los Santos Inocentes* is the Spanish version of April Fools so your awe is only limited by your creativity and courage. Lunar (Asian/Chinese) New Year fireworks are awe in a positive and terrifying way. Ask my son... Maybe volcanoes are safer after all.

6. Learn about scientific and technological discoveries: Study breakthrough findings in physics, medicine, biology, sociology and other fields. Chemistry is boring in general unless you are a geek like my mother. Yet acknowledge this at least, all biology is chemistry to some degree—organic chemistry. Consider how human ingenuity and collaboration have revealed amazing truths about reality. Let yourself be amazed by what we've learned. Watch a moon landing or space rocket launch for a moment of awe. Simply understand the ultimate and intricate power of your smartphone or marvel at artificial organs (a.k.a. organ-on-a-chip). Does your eReader or tablet have access to more books than the Library of Alexandria we saw in chapter 1? Yes. AMEN.

7. Connect (7Cs) with others' stories: Listen deeply to people's experiences of transformation, resilience, and transcendence. Notice how hearing about others' profound moments can spark awe in us. Share your own meaningful experiences. Find my dad if you want well-oiled and tested stories. Stories are the human language of awe transmission—better than most viruses. Happiness is at very least 50% stories. For some it is 99%.

8. Make time for wander and wonder: Create regular space in your life for activities that reliably inspire awe, whether that's hiking, visiting an improv space, a local comedy show, or watching a sunset. Treat cultivating awe as an important practice. More in the Wander Walk section below.

9. Document awe-inspiring moment: Keep a journal, take photos, or otherwise record experiences that fill you with wonder. This helps embed them in memory, imbue them with meaning and creates a personal "awe portfolio" you can revisit. Do not however spend more time documenting and re-living than actually awe-living.

10. Share the experience: When you encounter something awe-inspiring, invite others to experience it with you. Awe tends to foster connection (7Cs) and put our individual lives in broader perspective. Building community around wonder amplifies its power.

The key is approaching life with openness and receptivity to awe, while creating regular opportunities to encounter it. Note what specific activities tend to inspire awe for you. Record them. Repeat them, then also find new ones!

Wonder Walk and Wonder X

Wonder walks is something I have been doing spontaneously by myself for over a decade and then with my son, often walking back together from school since he was seven-year-old, way before I heard the term in a mindful meditation class, years later. Wonder walks can be in urban or rural areas, as well as in nature.

The evocatively named forest bathing (or *shinrin-yoku*) surfaced in Japan in the 1980s as both a treatment for burned-out technology workers and a way to reconnect the population with the country's

extensive network of forests. Shinrin-yoku even has some following in Quebec and Canada with Shinrin Yoku Québec (SYQC), INFOM Canada, and its certified members. The International Society of Nature and Forest Medicine (INFOM) was founded in Japan by Dr Qing Li. It works for the advancement of nature medicine as well as contributing to health, welfare, and integrated medical care, including research and scientific data both involving human stress reduction and the accompanying increased activation of human natural killer (NK) cells related to natural forest environments. They classify certain characteristic of forest canopy and size for ideal curative conditions. Immersing yourself in nature, exercising and mindfully using all five senses—touch, sight, hearing, smell, and taste—has many health and mental health benefits, directly and indirectly. More on this topic in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*.

While shinrin-yoku requires a setting of natural beauty and enhancing attributes, mindful walking can be performed anywhere, any time, if the person is committed to being and remaining present and mindful during the walk. Forest-bathing seems intuitive and easy. Almost everyone has enjoyed a nature walk; you don't have to be a hardcore hiker like my cousin who aims to complete the 7 summits. It is in my view, awe activation for beginners. Let me give you an advanced course.

You do not need a perfect forest; you do not need a forest; and you do not need to even walk! This is mindfulness so all you need is a mind! Do you have one? Then, the focus should not be the forest or nature or walking or anything else than.... Wonder!

Wonder walks, could be better described as wonder wandering! Let me describe one so you get the idea. I leave the high-rise building I live in and start the “walk” before even exiting the building, I just let my mind experience everything with wonder and excitement as if I were to see it for the first time or for the first time with this perspective. I am so happy to press the button to call the elevator, I see my finger press the button as commanded, wow! Then the button lights up, even more amazing. The elevator arrives and the doors open magically. This is incredible so far and I haven't left my floor. I reach down after a transporting descend (physically and mentally) in the elevating elevator. I exit my building and literally touch freedom as I am greeted with the fresh air. I enjoy the cool. I feel it and take it as pleasurable sensation. I walk on the pavement and notice construction all around. I am pleased. People are building new places, new homes, new memories, new families and communities. I see a construction or road work sign that fell on the street from heavy wind. I take it upon myself to pick it up and put it back into place. Not because I want to be a “good citizen” at this point, just because it is there, and I can. I lift the sign and find its weight heavy as I balance my force, flex my legs and arm muscles and push it back up. Having helped the construction or city worker or neighborhood, I take no ego pride or fake altruism, I simply continue my journey and find more wind and cool air to greet me. I take and thank them. I feel exactly the winds' weight, direction, intensity and how it makes a section of my body colder. I am amazed at all these sensations. I see a tree with leaves whistling. Some leaves are already on the ground. I found this life and death coexistence beautiful. I walk towards the closest tree and stop, I focus all my attention on the tree, I come closer and touch its bark, feel its ridges on my hand. I look at my hands and find them curious, unexplored and unappreciated. Every detail derails my “walk” into another endless opportunity for curiosity, wonder, awe, action, appreciation, mindfulness, pause and pondering. Nothing is too small, insignificant, average, or trivial. Time flies and intensity is high.

Wonder Wandering = Weapon Against Boredom and Loneliness

If you are not able to wander too much, say you are in school, workplace or in prison, sometimes the same depending on the teachers/principal, colleagues/boss and prison guards/warden, you can still wonder wander in your smaller space which still has enough to surprise you if you look deeper. Remember the kid in you. I remember being intrigued by the electricity polls on the roads when my parents were

driving (I now normally instinctively find them repulsive as a photographer). I also remember looking at the cracks in the sidewalks as if they held a special pattern, cadence, and importance. Find that fresh look and explore with renewed curiosity.

A girlfriend of mine send me a picture of an “ugly” pothole in Montreal while I was in an idyllic picturesque vacation setting abroad, but we both found the pothole beautiful as well, and perhaps more so. It could be a butthole instead of a pothole, a penitentiary “hole”, a sock with a hole, a hole in your budget, a hole in your theory, in your memory, a bullet hole in your body, or anything. It can be seen as “A Whole New World” like Aladdin if you can train your mind to make magic carpets in any situation. After the poetry, “hole” and “whole” may not be the best rhyme scheme but it does illustrate the surreal possibility of Disney’s fairytale dream anchored in awareness that life itself is a dream.

If you have temporarily exhausted your limited immediate surroundings and find them “bleak” which I am convinced they are not, or not nearly as much as you think.

First remember impermanence, this too shall pass as you blink.

Second, you can open your eyes with awe.

Third, you can close your eyes but not to withdraw; to find wonder within and draw from it.

Wonder is one of the greatest gifts and doesn’t require external manifestations like smile and laughter. That said, having had numerous *wonder wandering* or *wonder living*, I can say smiles and spontaneous chuckles may appear even if you try to casually suppress them. I often found myself laughing alone and smiling way too long or too intensely when in the midst of pure wonder or provoked bliss, that most people watching me from outside must have thought something was definitely wrong with me. Maybe that is what it looks like to be drunk in awe.

At this stage, what do I care what other actors on stage think of me, especially as they don’t even know they are acting? I care as much as I have to and not much more. I do not want to perturb their ego-centric or human-centric view of the world too much, but just a bit, why not. Further. It may be amusing and make me smile and laugh more. Watch me smile and laugh by myself and wonder. Is he crazy? Don’t mind if I am.

Wonder walk, wonder stand, wonder drive, wonder sound listening, wonder work, wonder writing, wonder urinating, wonder teeth flossing, wonder hair brushing, wonder heart beating, wonder salivating, wonder eating, wonder flight, wonder bus or metro ride, wonder swim, wonder gym...

My two favorites and easiest to practice, wherever you might be, might be:

1. Wonder Wait: whenever you wait for someone or something, switch to wonder mode and explore the moment until you forget what you are even waiting for.

Wonder = No Need for Patience (8Ps)

2. Wonder Watch: wherever you are, take in the view and learn to see the beauty (like modern art) from different angles and imagined aesthetic, plain and grotesque/hideous overlaps. Beauty or truthful transcending useful ugliness is in the eye of the beholder.

Wonder = Curiosity (7Cs) + Creativity (7Cs) + Presence (8Ps)

Wondering is asking, so involves curiosity. We saw in *Beyond Happy* that the 3rd type of happiness is psychological richness as largely defined by intellectual curiosity. With constant curiosity (even in mostly mundane or repetitious surroundings) we are staying free from boredom. Intense curiosity and presence (8Ps) is time better filled than by distraction with little purpose (8Ps)—like drugs, rumination, or finding your phone your friend. We may be staying away from feelings of isolation and solitude if we connect (7Cs) to the world in a way that renders social entanglements (with their pros and cons) almost superfluous or unnecessary. This has nothing to do with intrinsically introvert personalities or not. We can

create self-sufficiency, secure attachment and self-agency with accessing awe. Lastly, we are not making the process only neutral, patently pleased, glazed gladden or equanimous, we are making it marvelous with that wondrous mental wanderlust.

Equanimity+ = Equanimity + Positivity (8Ps)

Thus, add wonder to all your sauces, your meals, your movies, the extra reveal. Add wonder to your relationships, your thoughts, and emotions, add wonder to your actions, to your senses and perceptions. Add wonder to your bag of tricks; bring it wherever you go and use it more often than bear spray... and the times you prostrate or pray. AMEN.

Wonder within, outwardly play (8Ps).

The Awe Factor and Kama Muta

What qualifies as awesome or awe-inducing? Inspiration and amazement.

Awe produces an expanded self and shifts greed to generosity. It helps narrow mind and thought into a broader perspective. Mental flexibility is a key to happiness. Awe also adds meaning and purpose (8Ps). You have more purpose when you are part of a bigger picture, and less ego focused. I saw the 2024 total eclipse of the sun and people's reaction when the day became dark and colder instantly was impressive. I heard sounds of astonishment and delight. I later interviewed a few attendees, and everyone was smiling and happy. No, you don't need to wait for decades for the next full solar eclipse. You can find awe simply looking at the sun every day and remembering its incredible source of light, energy and life. You can find awe in the incredible organ that is your skin or your all-so-useful opposable thumb. Sure, nineteen other mammals and even two reptiles have them too. Sure, but none of them is currently reading the book you have in your hand.

We saw the potential of awe as having many psychological and physiological benefits. A practice of awe can make us feel timelessness and spaceless. It can reduce stress, loneliness, depression, and even relieves pain.

Summer Allen explains the "awe experiences are self-transcendent. They shift our attention away from ourselves, make us feel like we are part of something greater than ourselves, and make us more generous toward others." This means that awe reduces the ego and helps create experiential awareness (4As) of oneness.

Moreover, awe can increase oxytocin which is the bonding hormone—connection (7Cs). Oxytocin reduces stress by lowering the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis activation and cortisol. It is linked with altruistic and prosocial attitudes. Reduction of the dreaded ego and self-absorption. Keltner explains that awe awakens the mind from self interest to collective interest and from isolated to integrated self. It also breaks down "us versus them" thinking and tribalism we saw in *Beyond Happy* (and in warfare conflict above). Awe is a counterpoint to ego identity and selfishness. Lani Shiota's research further shows that little burst of awe makes one humble.

Jenny Stellar of the University of Toronto groups gratitude with compassion (7Cs), elevation (12Es) and awe (4As) as "Self-Transcendent Emotions" (STEs) for their capacity to encourage individuals to transcend their own momentary needs and desires and focus on those of another. These are not egoistic pride, nor self-satisfaction. ETFs are more than joy and euphoria, although these hedonistic positive emotions can both be easily shared or enjoyed collectively. We can say that collective pride is ego multiplication, and collective awe is communal elation. Admiration (9As), amusement (9As), adoration, "Being Moved" and wonder are other STEs. These STEs are different than other positive non-self-transcendent (i.e., self-directed, Hedonic or epicurean) emotions. STEs are primarily divided into

epistemic—knowledge and understanding—and social dimensions. Epistemic ones are excitement (12Es), enthusiasm (12Es), curiosity (7Cs), amusement (9As), surprise, inspiration, interest, fascination, wonder and awe (4As). Social STEs include grateful, appreciative (4As), thankful, tender, touched, and compassionate (7Cs)³⁹. All STEs alient prosocial behaviors regardless of their correlated dimension.

Figure 3: Key Positive and Self-Transcendent Emotions (STEs)

non-STEs	STEs	
Hedonistic (Self)	Social	Epistemic
Contentment (7Cs)	Compassion (7Cs)	Fascination
Satisfaction	Compersion (7Cs)	Curiosity (7Cs)
Elation (12Es)	Elevation (12Es)	Excitement (12Es)
Euphoria (12Es)	Exhilaration (12Es)	Enthusiasm (12Es)
Ecstasy (12Es)	Admiration (9As)	Amusement (9As)
Pleasure	Appreciation (4As)	Awe (4As)
Delight	Gratitude	Wonder
Bliss	Thankfulness	Interest
Joy	Playfulness (8Ps)	Inspiration

These social functions of caretaking, cooperation, and group coordination are helped by these STE positive emotions or states. They can aid kin, nonkin, and social collectives by fostering connection (7Cs), commitment (11Cs), and attachment to others. Feigning or faking their expression may be strategic for social reasons yet could be detected and backfire by been unauthentic and aversive⁴⁰. Furthermore, awe helps identification with humanity (collective ego), the willingness of collectively help others, as well as another STE, Kama Muta—the sense of oneness or devotion to others⁴¹.

Kama muta is associated with 'being moved', 'heart-warming', 'stirring', or 'being emotionally touched' and is associated with tears and goosebumps like awe. Goosebumps are linked with awe with over 35% of people reporting it compared to about 15% for compassion and love, and 6% for gratitude. Other mammals also have piloerection responses for fear and other emotions. We are not unique in our capacity for awe. Stay humble and selfless. Tears of awe signal an awareness (4As) of vastness and connection (7Cs), socially—through compassion (7Cs), care (N 7Cs), communion, union or kindness—, artistically or aesthetically. I have said for years that I have cried more tears of joy than of sadness most of my last 20 plus years. I know now that many were tears of awe and kama muta.

³⁹ Abatista, A. G. F., & Cova, F. (2023). Are Self-transcendent Emotions One Big Family? An Empirical Taxonomy of Positive Self-transcendent Emotion Labels. *Affective science*, 4(4), 731–743. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42761-023-00194-1>

⁴⁰ Stellar, J. E., Gordon, A. M., Piff, P. K., Cordaro, D., Anderson, C. L., Bai, Y., et al. (2017). Self-transcendent emotions and their social functions: compassion, gratitude, and awe bind us to others through prosociality. *Emot. Rev.* 9, 200–207. doi: 10.1177/1754073916684557

⁴¹ Pizarro et al. (2021) Self-Transcendent Emotions and Their Social Effects: Awe, Elevation and Kama Muta Promote a Human Identification and Motivations to Help Others. *Front. Psychol.*, 12 September 2021. Sec. Personality and Social Psychology. Volume 12 - 2021 | <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.709859>

Sources of Awe: A Symphony of Wonder

Surprisingly the #1 source of awe is interpersonal and others with a whooping 61% in the US and 73% in China (Bai et al.). For example, being in awe for someone's strength, generosity or courage (7Cs). The birth of a child produces awe, kindness or play (8Ps) can as well. Nature accounts for roughly 10%, art/music at 7%, knowledge at 5%, architecture at 3% and spiritual at 2%. Yes, spirituality is less awe-inspiring than one may think. Awe can also be induced by the self. Americans use it as a source for 9% versus 0.5% for Chinese. If you did not already know Americans have bigger egos, now you know at least one way! "I am so awesome," is not a bad thing to think but I would add "and everyone and everything is awesome too". According to Dacher Keltner's research and book *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life* there are eight main forms of awe triggers or wonders. Let's examine them together before I add my own interpretations and additions in the next section.

1. **Moral Beauty:** This is the most common and moving for most people. Witnessing acts of remarkable human goodness, courage (7Cs), or virtue. Examples include seeing someone make a profound sacrifice for others, acts of extraordinary kindness, or moments of moral courage that inspire and elevate us. These acts remind us of humanity's capacity for nobility. Political or social awe can be part of moral beauty. Engagement (12Es) in a cause or witnessing a political movement that resonates and may inspire courage that can result in awe. Think of Martin Luther King Jr. and the nonviolent Civil Rights movement, of Ghandi and Nelson Mandela. Think of the grass-root Canadian Trucker Freedom Convoy or the Pussy Riot activism (even if backed by US AID!!!). Think of the French Revolution or the Baltic Way involving 2 million people in a 675-kilometer human chain protest. War can also invoke awe with epic battles, strategy and courage, although I do not recommend war in any circumstance. Remember peace (8Ps)? Save it for the war movies, or even better, anti-war movies like Georgian *Tangerines* (2013), South Korean *The Front Line* (2011) and Japanese *The Human Condition* (1959-1961). Two people hugging in a meaningful way may create awe for them and others watching. Keltner sums up moral beauty in four major categories: courage, overcoming, strength and kindness.

2. **Collective Effervescence:** The transcendent feeling that arises from moving in synchrony with others, like in dance, ritual, or collective celebration. This includes experiences at music concerts, festivals, sporting events, or religious ceremonies where individuals feel unified into something larger than themselves. This is about sharing and sense of belonging in moments of merging. I love listening to live jazz in small venues. As we are increasingly living in a virtual world, we can still find collective effervescence in virtual formats, including awe-inspiring content or real connection (7Cs), but we should be aware that there is also the outer world that offers possibly even greater awesomeness and positive collectivism. Keltner writes that: "We lose track of time, our goals, and, often, our inhibitions. Free from the burden of the self, we feel part of something larger, and inclined towards the "saintly tendencies" of awe."

Collective Awe = Social Connection (7Cs) + Synchrony + Coherence (11Cs)

3. **Nature:** Nature was shown to often be described as the divine. "Keltner notes that in a US study, as local "natural wonders rose in abundance, its denizens were less likely to attend church or adhere to religion's dogmas. Getting outdoors is its own form of religion." Awe induced by looking at picturesque nature, in this case BBC's iconic *Planet Earth* series also allowed less divide—less polarized opinions and more openness to see opposing views as not incompatibly different, but rather closer than they seem. More mental flexibility and desire for unity instead of separation and self-interest. Art and technology done right can enhance community by awe experiences, even in the privacy of one's home.

Nature Awe = Less Divide + Less (Need for) Divine

Beyond beautiful sights, we also know that scents and sounds of nature can also produce awe. Many types of relaxation music involve nature sounds. We know that sounds of water activate the vagus nerve and reduce stress states. The vastness and power of the natural world, from grand vistas like mountains and oceans to the intricate patterns in leaves or snowflakes, the smell of flowers, or the touch of sand can easily bring us rapture and wonder. Appreciation (4As) and awe (4As) of nature can provide perspective and healing. Nature's ability to dwarf us while simultaneously revealing incredible complexity and order is a primary trigger for awe. Consider the migration of monarch butterflies—millions of delicate orange wings carrying ancient genetic wisdom across continents. Or contemplate the bizarre reality of the pistol shrimp, capable of creating underwater shock waves that reach temperatures nearly as hot as the sun's surface. The natural world provides endless sources of awe like the mathematics of pine cones following the Fibonacci sequence, the perfect hexagons of honeycomb, the synchronized dance of starling murmurations, or the ancient light of stars reaching us across billions of years. Backpackers after 3 days of nature immersion also performed 50% better in reasoning tasks than one would at the beginning of the journey. Nature helps problem-solving, reason, cognition, concentration, creativity (7Cs) and curiosity (7Cs).

A rafting expedition produced awe above other positive emotions and led to more social connection, more loving towards one's family and friends, less stress and more happiness, even one week later. It also reduced war veteran's PTSD symptoms by 32% and provide peace (8Ps).

Nature may be more appealing to some than others, yet no one can deny its powerful pull to bring out awe with its vastness, complexities and varied vistas in people ranging from nature-lover to nature-hater. Is there even such a thing as nature-hater? Nature is you, nature is me, the birds, bees and trees, the bedrock and the rain, the grain that feeds the human populace... Appreciate nature because you would not be there without it. It is you. You are nature.

4. Music: Both creating and listening to music can induce awe through its ability to express the ineffable, create emotional resonance, and transport us beyond ordinary experience. The patterns, harmonies, and emotional depth of music speak to something fundamental in human experience. The composer Gustav Mahler once said, "A symphony must be like the world. It must contain everything." When we experience profound music, our brains synchronize with the rhythms and harmonies in a phenomenon called "neural entrainment." Consider the complex mathematics underlying Bach's counterpoint, the spine-tingling effect of a perfect harmonic resolution, the way certain frequencies can induce specific emotional states, the universal human response to certain musical intervals and the rhythm of dance. Complex harmonies, unexpected modulations, rhythmic complexity, timbral exploration and perfect pitch can give many awe moments. From children making music with kitchen pots and pans, to the acoustics of the Sydney Opera House, music is an awe-inducing powerhouse.

Fetuses can respond to music in the womb, months before even been born. 1-year-old babies show more altruistic behaviors if they bounced in synchronous rhythm to music. Baby awe makes nicer babies. My son, Claudius, learned how to breakdance almost as soon as he learned how to walk! Much more on music benefits further in the happiness series but suffice to say that music can bring connection (7Cs) and awe (4As), as well as Peace (8Ps), passion (8Ps) and contentment (7Cs).

5. Visual Art & Architecture: Human-created works that embody extraordinary skill, beauty, or scale. This includes everything from ancient temples to modern museums, from classical paintings to contemporary installations that challenge our perceptions and understanding. Great art can stop us in our tracks, creating what art historian James Elkins calls "moments of visual arrest." Think of the profound depth in Rembrandt's self-portraits, the cosmic swirls of Van Gogh's "Starry Night", the mathematical

precision and spiritual window of Islamic geometric patterns, the impossible perspectives of M.C. Escher or the power of Michelangelo or Rodin's sculptures. Beyond religious art, realism and impressionism, lies a multitude of art expression. Might you enjoy the surrealists (Dali, Magritte, etc.) in Europe or the modern art in Asia (Yayoi Kusama, Pacita Abad, etc.), you are sure to have a moment or two of awe admiring some artwork or installation. Think also of the poignancy of profound photography or the playfulness (8Ps) and plasticity of Frank Gehry's geometry, which brings us to architecture.

Marvel at the spaces and visions created by Santiago Calatrava, Tadao Ando and Antonio Gaudi. The world-renowned Chinese-American architect Ieoh Ming Pei (aka I. M. Pei) lived to be over 102. The acclaimed architect shaped the world in over six decades of bold designs. I had the chance to admire his work in the US, China (Suzhou, Hong Kong), Japan (Kyoto), Qatar, Singapore and France—for the Louvre Museum which houses thousands of the world's best visual art. Zaha Hadid died at only 65 years of age, but I saw her magical work in Guangzhou (Opera House), Seoul (Dongdaemun Design Plaza) and Baku (Heydar Aliyev Center). Architect is not only beautiful but enhances life and can allow for more connection (7Cs) with yourself, others and the world. The right architecture can induce awe and feelings of belonging, peace (8Ps) or passion (8Ps). Architecture does not have to be transcendent or world-class, you can simply start to notice it around you and gain a new appreciation from your city surroundings, including urbanism and man-made parks. Even the architecture of your local transit, home, workplace, school, library or shopping mall can have some qualities to value, appreciate and find awe. Look up, look down, look everywhere and find awe.

Oscar-nominated movies *The Brutalist* (2024) and *My Architect* (2003) showcase emotional storylines, artistry and otherworldly architecture. The subject of the second film is American architect Louis Kahn, and the film is a complicated and personal tribute to the writer/director's father—like *The Salt of the Earth* (2014) is for Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado. It is a moving tribute to a famous and notorious architect father. It also inspired my personal physical visit to two of Kahn's masterpieces, including being invited to a private tour and entering the elusive Bangladesh Parliament when no tourist could due to terrorist threat at the time, which may be a story on its own some day. Film is also a form of visual art, with sound and narrative. May it be photography, film, painting, sculpture, architecture or other visual and spatial elements, are capacity to find awe in these are immense and we should appreciate their importance. Some may be intrinsically attracted more to music and auditory aspects, while others may be more visual learners and observers, but both types of art access senses, sensations and feelings that can overwhelm us and give rise to awe if we allow our minds to amplify them with attention.

6. Spiritual & Religious Experiences: Encounters with the divine or transcendent, whether through formal religious practice or personal spiritual experiences. These experiences often involve a sense of connection (7Cs) to something vastly larger than oneself—as we saw nature can provide as a suitable substitute. This spiritual awe comes from stories that stretch the imagination as we will see later more globally, but the ones we refer here border on the supernatural and on rituals and superstitions. There seems to be a balance where people want stories that step outside the immediate rational logic without being too far-fetched to hold strong beliefs or faith for. Indeed, this balance found in the brain's biology and psychological functioning narrows the near infinite number of possible supernatural stories to a confined and defined structure and stricter string of “acceptable” stories. That is why most religious or spiritual thoughts are in the range of minimal counterintuitive (MCI) narratives. MCI narratives may be easier to remember than completely intuitive stories—which may be too mundane to remember, and not emotionally charged or awe-inducing enough. They are rarely, however, completely far-fetched stories (maximally counterintuitive) that do not make much sense and appear too much to truly believe and trust

in⁴². Furthermore, credibility-enhancing displays (CREDs)—like religious fasting, praying, wearing specific clothes or effigies—enhances MCI stories learning, belief, and social transmission of beliefs⁴³.

We can see how experiencing or believing in something that is counterintuitive like coincidences, miracles, virgin births, ghosts, spirits or synchronicity may induce awe as it stretches the imagination and the boundaries of the known. As long as these stories are not completely “whacky” to us. Even superheroes with their superhuman powers are stories we adore (ask Marvel and Star Wars fans) because these characters are profoundly human and relatable, simply a bit more “awesome” and “cool”. Gods, Angels, Saints, Satan and Martyrs are also much more human-like than we would like to admit. Religious text and theology sometimes insist God is omniscient yet science show that people still think of God with certain human qualities. Even in texts and stories, God speaks or writes with what clearly resembles human mind and even emotions. As we saw in chapter 1, awareness awakens us to the fact that everything is as story. We can say that religious stories are particularly good stories we love to believe in and share. Yet as pointed out earlier in the section, they generate less awe than we may have originally thought. Perhaps they produce conformity and fear more than awe.

However, we must also remember that explanation of negatively perceived events can lower the negative perception, feelings, emotions and mood. This is why spiritual or religious stories can be comforting to cope with our primal fears. More on this in *Beyond Spirituality*. Reversely, over-explaining positively perceived events or emotions like awe can rob us of their mystery as explained by Daniel Gilbert in *Stumbling on Happiness*. This means that spiritual awe experiences may well be simply enjoyed without either over-believing or attaching importance to the stories—which may lead to expectations and disappointments in the future if they do not reoccur. Think of the awe you may feel seeing a well orchestrated magic trick. Enjoy the awe it illicit without overthinking, nor overcommitting to the belief in magic. Know that your revaluation of the supercherie once someone explains the trick to you may change your subjective view but does not have to strip you of the experiential awe. Think how magical Christmas felt when you believed in the story of Santa, whereas you may see it now as the capitalist marketing scam it is. It was still “special” and magical as a child. We must find a balance between awareness and allowing awe, even when the sources of awe are unrealistic, MCI or MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe) stories. Enjoy your brief spiritual experiences or superhero movies, just don’t necessarily believe in them. AMEN.

7. Life & Death: The mysteries of birth, death, and the miracle of consciousness itself. Witnessing the beginning or end of life, or contemplating the vast mystery of existence, can trigger profound awe. I have witnessed both birth and death and find them both powerful primers for awareness and awe, even appreciation and (sometimes difficult) acceptance: the 4 Aces! Also, awe can help come to terms with death and many report the feeling and thoughts that “it is okay if I die” when they experience deep awe in any form. For instance, transcending music brings Susan Cain in a state where she welcomes death. She says that “it doesn’t matter that everyone I know is going to die, including me,” when listening to amazing music. The fear of death is a fundamental fear we will examine further in *Beyond Spirituality*. Death can produce awe—even negative awe, which we now learned to transform! Birth, or signs of life and transformation like the seasons, can give glimpses of awe which may be tied to nature and the universe.

⁴² Norenzayan, A., Atran, S., Faulkner, J., & Schaller, M. (2006). Memory and mystery: The cultural selection of minimally counterintuitive narratives. *Cognitive science*, 30(3), 531-553.

⁴³ Willard, A. K., Henrich, J., & Norenzayan, A. (2016). Memory and belief in the transmission of counterintuitive content. *Human Nature*, 27, 221-243.

Life and death are salient symbols and signals of the wonderful cycles and changes in this reality full of awe. Embrace impermanence! AMEN.

Moreover, death can be literal or metaphorical. Motivational speaker and author Kyle Cease says in his 2024 video “The Funeral” that “when it comes to mourning other people we’ve been taught that it’s okay to mourn other people, but we often don’t know how to do that we ourselves”. He means that awe can lead to awakening and awareness through a subjective death and rebirth process—and you do not need to be a “born again Christian”. We should acknowledge and accept that there are parts of us that are ready to “die”. We need to unlearn, unattached and mourn our past identities completely, knowing we are not our thoughts and ego—we are experience and oneness. We may need courage (7Cs) to push through our fears—of death, and of losing our precious identity. All this without knowing what is on the other side—embrace impermanence and uncertainty. This is the awareness we talked about in chapter 1 and requires unlearning and letting go (chapter 2) of ego identity. In addiction therapy there is also a process of grieving, and one involves writing a letter to your “addiction” acknowledging how it has served you in the past and how it no longer serves you. Awe by death acceptance, allows us to live more fully.

Lastly, Buddha explains that there is in fact no birth and nor death. There is only transformation and manifestation. If you think of the world as nondual or oneness, it is easy to see that the moment we call birth (coming out of our mother’s vagina) or death (vital organs shutting down) are very arbitrary in the grand scheme of things. Thich Nhat Hanh talks about “interbeing” as a much better term than “being” or even “nonbeing”. We are all connected and part of a whole. We do not need Heaven, an afterlife or reincarnation to live on. “We” continue automatically as much as we were part of the world in a different form before being “born”. Our ancestors, humans and others, until the last universal common ancestor (LUCA) and all the way to the big bang or beginning all predate us and are also us. Time and space can be one as well and our default mode network is mostly preoccupied with the referential self (“me, my, I” —the ego) and representations (stories) of the past and the future. Me, him, her, other are all false in the awareness of nonduality. Allowing to train yourself to feel oneness with less disturbing thoughts and be present as much as possible instead of ruminating will allow greater awe and happiness. Meditation is a way to train as well as asking questions like “who actually hears?”, “who am I?”, “when am I?”, as suggested by nondual teacher Barry Weber in *Into the Stillness: Dialogues on Awakening Beyond Thought* and other resources. We can transcend life and death, living in the now and quieting our noisy default mode network self in time perception and self and other subroutines. Shedding our self-referential thoughts, fears, aversions and desires, awe remains. Weber’s teaches about the aware space between thoughts, how to increase awareness by decreasing thoughts and the dissolution of the time-bound sense of self. In awakened consciousness, the usual sense of being in time (“when am I?”) dissolves into a timeless present moment awareness. The “I” that asks “when” is seen to be a mental construct rather than your true nature. The book suggests that in stillness, the questions of “when,” “where,” and even “who am I” become irrelevant as you recognize yourself as the aware presence in which all experiences arise and pass away. The path involves moving from identification with thoughts and time-bound experiences to recognition of the timeless, thoughtless awareness that is your (our) essential nature.

8. Big Ideas & Intellectual Epiphanies: Moments of sudden understanding or encounters with ideas that fundamentally shift our worldview. This includes scientific discoveries, philosophical insights, or any revelation that expands our understanding of reality—perhaps like the last paragraph. Think of the many “eureka” moments you may have had. The problems you or others were able to solve, the discoveries and transformative technologies. Remember the moon landing (yes, it happened) or the first

time you talked to Google Assistant, Alexa or Siri—was the awe eerie? Did your jaw drop when you initially used ChatGPT or first created a generative AI video with Veo3? Was there a movie scene, a book or a book passage that changed your worldview significantly? This book you are reading may be an accumulation and a culmination of many aha moments for me and a wish to share a few with you. Yes, awe and powerful ideas are contagious. An epiphany (12Es)—also the name of a small town in Quebec I slept in one night—, is a gateway to awe in the moment as well as the possibility to revisit that awe. I have not revisited that small town however, but perhaps in my mind, as it was a spontaneous and awe-producing night for many reasons, including nature (outdoors), music (biggest classical music festival in Canada), creativity (7Cs), connection (7Cs), passion (8Ps) and sex (see below).

More Sources of Awe: Awesome Part 2

Consistent stories of these eight sources of awe have been observed and repeated in many people, cultures, countries and circumstances in Keltner's diverse 2600 narrative from 20 languages. However, they still have limitations based on Keltner's definition that includes "transcend" and "vast and mysterious". These are words that may or may not correspond to the neurological manifestations of awe or the practical one we have been talking about in this happiness journey.

Still, from that definition and sample, about 5% or over 100 stories did not correspond to the major "eight wonders". They reportedly include senses and sensations, sex and games⁴⁴—play (8Ps).

I would like to add eight more specific "wonders" or sources of awe to our discussion.

9. Competitive Sports and Status: I was in awe when seeing Yuna Kim's artistic skating's 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics Gold medal performances or Chae-yeon Kim free skate in the 2025 Asian Winter Games. Some had tears seeing Usain Bolt bolt pass the 100-m line before any other human ever had. We saw that collective effervescence can be a source of awe and this can be especially true for the fandom of sports team across the world. Hockey, rugby, cricket, football, and other fans dwell in collective effervescence and vicarious ego identity with the team they feverishly support. However, there is also something intrinsically awe-inducing to see or be an athlete that surpass his or her limits. Awe is always about pushing the boundaries in any discipline. Sports is one of them, might it be martial arts or a well-run marathon. See the excellent 2023 biopic movie *Nyad*, where athlete Diana Nyad, at the age of 60 and with the help of her best friend and coach, commits to achieving her life-long dream: a 110-mile open ocean swim. Quite remarkable to see or do. This produces awe in many as a showcase of the mastery of a craft (11Cs) and a clear exhibit of clarity (11Cs) of mind, courage (7Cs), passion (8Ps) and perseverance (8Ps). In the 1976 Montreal Summer Olympics, the world of gymnastics was forever changed by a 14-year-old Romanian girl named Nadia Comăneci. She achieved what was previously thought impossible: the first "perfect 10" in Olympic gymnastics history. This unprecedented feat not only catapulted her to global stardom but also redefined the standards of excellence in the sport.

In April 27, 1994, Dominik Hasek was just in his first season as a starting goaltender for the Buffalo Sabres, and he led the NHL in save percentage and goals-against average. He won the first of six Vezina Trophies and finished second for the Hart Trophy as league MVP. Their first-round playoff opponent that spring was the New Jersey Devils who had a young incredible goalie as an opponent: other Hall of Fame goalie Martin Brodeur, who would win the Calder Trophy as the season's top rookie. I happened to catch the game at home and can easily say it was the most spectacular goalie game in hockey or probably any

⁴⁴ Keltner, D. (2024) *Awe: The Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*. Penguin Books.
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other sport. I was in awe, alone, glued to the screen for hours. A nail-bitter more suspenseful than a movie. The Sabres were facing elimination and Hasek would not let any goal in. Both teams shot a total combined of 120 shots on net and the game ended at 1:52 a.m. ET, after a four-overtime!!! Hasek made 70 saves to secure the most iconic shutout in history. Brodeur had 49 saves and finally let a goal in. If you saw any of these performances and did not feel a tinge of awe, I am not sure what to tell you. Sports is a clear source of awe for many, especially elite, competitive sports. I would classify it as distinct from moral beauty because the outcome of a sport is not moral in itself, it may even be associated with ego and status, yet can produce an inspirational, perhaps fanatic, awe based on skills, execution and accomplishment.

This awe trigger may be the same as the star status we give to actors, standup comics, singers, royalty and billionaires in the last decades—actors and jesters may have made us laugh or cry centuries ago but we were not in awe of them due to their lesser standing. Same as sport heroes were not as famous before the Super Bowl reached 100 million viewers in the United States, the World Cup finals viewed by over 1 billion viewers worldwide and the Olympics by around 5 billion—over half the planet! We can see people with Messi jerseys in every corner of the world and the generations before knew and had almost spiritual reverence for Maradona, Michael Jordan, Muhammad Ali, Ayrton Senna, Serena Williams, Tiger Woods or Babe Ruth. Before television and social media, athletes rarely generated this type of awe.

Skill and status produce awe in people and may reduce individual ego—like all awe—yet it can dangerously put someone on a pedestal transferring the ego to an image or story. Status is linked to survival because in a group, higher status is linked to more access to resources—food, sex, social bonds, notoriety or now money (stocks and bonds). In 2025, maybe some admire and are in awe of Tik Tok dancers and Mr. Beast—internet star status. Awe? Ah, well. “Hawk Tuah”! Maybe not all awe is transcendent like the Jackass franchise (2000-2022) slapstick senseless risk-taking comedy with perceived indecency and potential encouragement of dangerous behavior.

10. Skilfulness and Risk: May it be in sports, music, science, business or other personal qualities or actions, we have the ability to admire people who we find skilful or courageous (7Cs), our even better to do these things ourselves. The circus provides both qualities with often daring acts and deft craft (11Cs), developed for our entertainment. Adventure in travel, sports, and individual quests can generate awe. Exploration (12Es) and experimentation (12Es) can lead to awe. A scientific survey, an archeological dig or an Antarctic attempt to survive at the end of the world. When we see others take risk, or we ourselves take risk proving our personal courage over fear, we can be awe-stricken. This can range from hotdog-eating or sword-swallowing contests to the speed racing and the space conquest. One of the reasons Mr. Beast became one of the most popular social media celebrities was that he explored unusual circumstances and humans drive for risk and reward. Money is a motivator in many reality TV shows that test various skills and have a variety of explicit or inherent risks and rewards, including social. People are glued to their screens watching the 37th season of *The Amazing Race*. People love risk and adventure, and partly because of the awe moments they can provoke.

I personally experienced a day-long *Amazing Race Experience* in Quebec City, Canada and thoroughly remember the experience as one of the best group activities of my life. The thrills, the wit, the risks, the rush are omnipresent. A sure dose of sustained awe, coupled with the competitive aspect we saw in sports. Same goes for the abundance of awe I felt bungee jumping in New Zealand—which I ended up doing three times in the same day—and before, during and after my two skydiving jumps at 13 000 feet. Awe moments from risk and courage with no real “moral” beauty. Canyoning in Venezuela, Jordan and Dominica; whitewater river rafting on the Zambezi class V (highest danger) rapids in Zambia, or tamer rivers in Chile and Canada; Paragliding in Venezuela, China and Georgia. All these gave me arresting

moments. For you it may be parkour, rock-climbing, hiking, skiing, sailing, scuba-diving, surfing, skateboarding, snowboarding, diving or free diving. High risk activities push the limits and produce awe. It makes sense that it allows us to come to term with our own possible death... and hopefully live to tell the tale!

I had the opportunity to witness an unusual and dangerous popular sport in Central Asia in Kyrgyzstan named Kok Boru or Buzkashi—not to be confused with Bukkake, another dangerous sport. Buzkashi originated in Turkmenistan and is now widespread in the region, where Kyrgyzstan was already crowned the Nomad Games champion. The goal of the game is to grab, from the horse, a 20+ Kg beheaded animal carcass, usually a goat or a sheep. The player then gallops through the field to throw the “ball” in the opposition’s goal, while other horsemen defend their territory with fervor and frenzy. I am a proficient rider and rode in Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia for days, yet I would not likely play that virile and visceral game. Never say never, since I wrestled a Mongolian wrestling champion in Northern Mongolia and arm wrestled a Muay Thai champion in Southern Thailand. Surprisingly, I won both matches fair and square. Everyone was in awe. I can assure you that me too!

Lastly, skills can be any and everything. My friend had goosebumps watching a skilled (South) Korean beatboxer named “Wing” (Gunho Kim) where the interviewers had their mouth wide open in amazement—all physical manifestations of awe as we saw earlier. We are impressed by our fellow human’s ability. We can also be sometimes by in awe of animals or technology. People love deft dog tricks, majestic horses, smart dolphins, crazy cats and more. More than the awe of generative AI, we have been impressed and in awe of the phenomenal features and advent of cars (way before they were self-driving), planes, trains and robots—the home cleaning type, the ones that greet us at Asian airports, the sexbots or the Tesla Bot coming soon.

11. Sex and Attraction: Physical attraction can overwhelm the senses in a very awe-like way. Watching (or hearing) someone sexy, touching a person you find physically attractive or feeling a deep emotional connection (7Cs) can make you go beyond yourself. Sex is a physical manifestation of this attraction, and the best sexual experiences can surely be transcending. We saw earlier how seeing and listening can produce awe. Sex can have these two components but moreover is the master and ultimate form of touching. It is also the perfect vessel to discover intimate smell and pheromones—a friend of mine at UCLA is studying the vocalization and sent of sex. Deep meaningful hugs, and physical, verbal, written or mental foreplay can play a role in producing awe. Play (8Ps), creativity (7Cs) and curiosity (7Cs) are important component to optimum sex. Passionate (8Ps) sexual interaction is, as many will agree—allosexual or asexual alike—a possible key to awe experiences and emotional connection (7Cs).

Sex and attraction are closely linked through desire and intimacy. Arousal is not the same as attraction or desire and we can demystify these concepts in another more thorough analysis. Suffice to saw that attraction makes us wants to go beyond ourselves (reduces the ego) and towards something. The attraction is not always sexual in nature. We may simply want to be in someone’s presence (8Ps). Admiration is one of the 9 Anchors as we will see in *Don’t Be Authentic, Pay Attention!* and can be linked to attraction and awe. Attraction and admiration overlap through appreciation of qualities. Both admiration and awe involve a sense of elevation (12Es), but awe is typically more intense. Admiration and awe connect through recognition of something extraordinary—skill, beauty, courage, etc.

Witnessing a beautiful sunset together with someone, listening to mesmerizing music or dancing may lead to awe... and to the bedroom—or your creative venue of choice. You will not be surprised that awe—even negative awe—, and especially shared awe, can enhance sex and attraction by deepening emotional connections (oxytocin). Awe increases bonding—sometimes bondage. If you want more and

better sex, find awe moments and deeper connection, healthy veneration, flexibility and openness. Dopamine is also involved in attraction, awe and sex. Attraction involves interest, fascination, and connection. Admiration is linked to respect, reverence, recognition and appreciation (4As), while awe is coupled with wonder, humility, and transcendence. Some of these overlap in emotions, feelings, thoughts and biology. Another positive loop like the loop-the-loop in a rollercoaster or aerial maneuver.

We will look at the underlying mechanisms and other benefits (and challenges) of sexual attraction, desire and connection in *Beyond Sex*. Love is both addiction (see *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention!*) and awe. Awe is sexy and sexy is awe!

12. Smell and Touch: Touch itself can produce awe with oxytocin as its physiological driver and optimum connection (7Cs) between human beings. Awe in turn increases oxytocin even more, creating a positive feedback cascade. Mesmerizing massages can surely produce awe and feeling of out-of-body transcendence. Sometimes, simply holding someone's hand or being caressed is enough to go beyond our ego. Touch is the less explored of our senses, and I have a friend who is creating kinesthetic art where touch is at the center of the experiences. Fingertips, for example, are highly sensitive and can have up to 100 receptors per square centimeter, while erogenous, ticklish or other zones can make people say ah, wow and more. Haptic feedback is another growing field of study. While a video can trick the human eye with 24 to 60 frames per second or 60 Hz refresh rate, a haptic device requires up to 1000Hz (1kHz) for high-fidelity haptic experiences.

Lastly, smell has a near infinite world to discover on its own. Read the classic Patrick Suskind 1985 novel *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* for inspiration—about the awe of smell, not of murder! Smell the awe? The olfactory system has direct connections to the limbic system, particularly the amygdala and hippocampus, which process emotions and memories. Unlike other senses, smell information bypasses the thalamus (the brain's sensory relay station), creating more immediate emotional responses, even before reaching conscious awareness. The neural architecture prioritizes emotional processing of smells.

The petrichor scent after rainfall in a desert can trigger awe by signaling a rare transformation of a harsh environment. The distinctive smell of the ocean at dawn can evoke vastness and timelessness. Dr. Rachel Herz showed that scents used in worship can measurably increase spiritual feelings even in neutral settings. A 2018 study published in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology* demonstrated that participants exposed to forest-based terpenes (pine, cedar) showed increased scores on awe assessment scales compared to control groups. The researchers found these natural scents activated similar brain regions as visual experiences of natural grandeur. The power of smell to induce awe lies in its unique ability to simultaneously trigger powerful emotions, autobiographical memories, and subconscious associations—often before we're even consciously aware of what we're smelling. Unconscious and undercover awe. Additionally, cannabis plant background material alone, including terpenes, attenuated the fear response as a potential new treatment for PTSD and fearful memories, while tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) alone did not⁴⁵.

13. Food and Drinks: You do not have to be chef, cook or foodie to understand the power of food. Many cultures use food to connect (7Cs) and a bountiful source of great joy. Try not to finish your plate in a hospitality-honoring home-cooked meal in many cultures and you will offend someone. Ask for another plate to create more awe and appreciate. Even though people may eat several times a day, some forget how each bite can possibly produce awe.

⁴⁵ Murkar, A., Kent, P., Cayer, C., James, J., Durst, T., & Merali, Z. (2019). Cannabidiol and the Remainder of the Plant Extract Modulate the Effects of Δ^9 -Tetrahydrocannabinol on Fear Memory Reconsolidation. *Frontiers in behavioral neuroscience*, 13, 174. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnbeh.2019.00174>

Even if alone, I suggest people try the eating mindful meditation to involve as many senses as possible and be present (8Ps) while eating. All senses can be invoked in eating but here again food is the king of one: taste. As in sex, it is a normal species survival activity, yet our body and brain have been made to enjoy it immensely, which means we can access awe more readily if we pay attention (9As). There is a reason why people started to coin the expression “food orgasm”. Whatever your tastes are, you can appreciate and develop them to find awe in most of your meals. I did my share of mindful eating and guided meditations are easy to find on the internet, in synchronous virtual groups or in real life like I did with some raisins. Other popular ones can involve chocolate but I love this fruity passage which includes connection (7Cs), contentment (7Cs), perspective zooming and presence (8Ps) from Thich Nhat Hanh:

“An orange is nothing less than a miracle. It is just like you—you are also a miracle of life. You are a manifest miracle.

If I am 100 percent there, the orange reveals itself to me 100 percent. As I concentrate on the orange, I get deep insight from it. I can see the sun and the rain that are in it. I can see the flowers of the orange tree. I can see the little sapling sprouting, and then the fruit growing. Then I begin mindfully to peel the fruit. Its presence—its color, its texture, its smell, its taste—is a real miracle, and the happiness that comes to me from getting deeply in touch with it can become very, very great. A single orange is enough to give you a great deal of happiness when you are truly there, entirely alive, fully present, getting deeply in touch with one of the miracles of life that surrounds you.”

You can surely see the wonder and awe to be found in food—and in everything!

Drinks can also serve as a secondary source of awe. From mixology to elaborate tea ceremonies, people have found craft beers, coffee, matcha, single malt scotch, port wine or pure fruit juices to heighten their moods and sometimes produce awe. If there is an entire profession called sommelier for wine expertise, we can imagine that tasting refined liquids can induce awe often enough. I do not promote (nor prohibit) alcohol or caffeine, but it is important to note that awe from drinks does not need to come from the mind-altering content.

Ayahuasca or magic mushroom tea do not taste particularly good and although we can learn to enjoy bitterness, the rancid aspect we detect is to protect us from poisons, which they arguably are. Ethanol and methanol in alcoholic drinks are too and promote disinhibition (artificial, fake or “liquid courage”) and alters mood, along with less desirable effects. Ayahuasca is a psychoactive brew made from the Banisteriopsis caapi vine and a plant containing dimethyltryptamine (DMT), traditionally used by Indigenous cultures in the Amazon for medicinal and spiritual purposes. DMT, like the psilocybin used in magic mushroom are known to reduce the DMN (ego and self-referential network) thus increasing the feeling of vastness, oneness and connection to the world beyond me, myself and my surroundings.

Lastly, good quality water like I experienced in the city of Sofia, Bulgaria, or even non-deadly water in your home can be a source of pleasure and possible awe. Amazing to know that a substance with no odor, no taste and no brain alteration (only healthy hydration) like water can give you awe if you want to. The spices of life can also to have no spice like the minimalist Japanese cuisine suggests. *Foodgasm*. AMEN.

14. Travel and New Experiences: Fresh from a few travel tales, one can understand how traveling and new experiences can lead to awe as explained in the begging of the chapter. Since awe is activated when we challenge our preconceived ideas of the world, travelling and new experiences are prime candidates. Travel to foreign places increase your chances of awe decidedly—hopefully positive awe if you practice acceptance (4As) and appreciation (4As), instead of resisting with futility different worldviews and missing cultural learning opportunities.

Discovering “foreign” neighborhoods in the city we live in is also a cheaper and easier way to find different kinds of people, subculture, architecture, etc. Trying new cuisine and restaurants in your area can be daring and may or may not break your bank, depending on if you aim for competition for McDonalds, Michelin stars or something in between. Get off the beaten path and experience things you are not used to. Not just places but activities. If you never really liked (or even despise) country or jazz music, ask someone who loves that type of music to share his or her few favorite songs and give you context. If you don’t understand heavy metal, ask a friend to bring you to a concert and join a mosh pit. I was at a multicultural book club gathering and one person in his twenties had read 10 books in his life, while I had read more in the previous six months. Another had managed to read two books in his entire life and was in his thirties! These two were open to new experiences and to awe. We all had an amazing, enriching, deep discussion and connection (7Cs). Not all new experience will give you a source of awe, but you will be surprised of the awe we can find with nonjudgement, openness, curiosity (7Cs) and a beginner’s mind.

15. Playfulness and Cuteness: Poetry (see below) or standup comedy can be cute and playful (8Ps). Humour is an amazing source of happiness, because of how it affects our bodies and brains, and can sometimes produce awe in its extreme form. The cuteness of human babies has allowed us to care (11Cs) for ours and even others’ children. It is also why we find cat videos cute or amusing (9As). Some anthropologists argue that *homo sapiens*’ cuteness has partially allowed us to survive and dominate the *homo neanderthalensis* by increasing interbreeding *and protecting our youth and adults from violence*. As humans, animals we find cute we tend to kill or eat less. Many would not eat dogs, dolphins, monkeys, horses or other humans, although a few do. This cuteness may play into attraction we saw before as a physical trait but also as an action. We also find “cute” what babies do and what our mate (when we are in love!) do, no doubt. This could possibly be a source of awe. More on the cultures and context of adorableness in *Don’t Be Authentic, Pay Attention!* We can however remember a moment that made our friend say “oh, that’s so cute!” while laughing, smiling, putting hands in front of open mouth or other signs of awe.

Certainly, we can also see that playfulness produces awe on a small scale. Collective effervescence requires many people, whereas playfulness needs only—and prefers—a small amount of people, even two or even just you. Play is an essential part of the happiness equation we continue to examine in our happiness book series and in the families I coach to incorporate more fun and less phone in their lives but suffice to say that it can also be linked to awe inasmuch as it can inspire when there is a particularly clever play. Solo play is not only sexual! Children do and should play alone as part of their development. Adults do too, from Sudoku, solitary and video games.

Imagine you have played chess for years and see a chess master make an incredible move, that is awe from admiration and skill. You may also make an incredible move yourself, even if you may be neither a grandmaster nor the fictional female champion in Netflix’s popular *Queen’s Gambit* and be in awe of yourself. You may simply enjoy playing chess with someone and even enjoy losing. Losing yourself in the moment instead, in awe and presence (8Ps). That is the beauty and awe in play for the sake of playing and especially unstructured play with elements of surprise and improvisation.

Conversations can be play. I used to roleplay with my brother for hours in the backseat of the car during long road trips and words alone transported us to awe-filled worlds and intimate, creative, connected back-and-forth world-building and interacting, way better than the best video games available. Playful conversations can be flirting or simply friendly humour as well.

You may write a clever composition or sing in the shower, car or karaoke and be in awe. This is the interplay of play and awe. Play along, laugh, live, find awe. Appreciation (4As) of the awesomeness with awareness (4As) and full acceptance (4As) of this Cosmic Joke.

16. Stories and Writing: Poetry or prose, short stories or even quotes can provoke awe. We talked about big ideas before, but sometimes it is cute ideas that make awe arise. Small ideas or ideas rearranged with insights, comedy, wit, artistry, suspense, surprise, plot twists or emotional storytelling can trigger awe moments. I have been known to laugh out loud while reading alone. Some can easily have goosebumps, heart racing or genuine smiles. Writing may “only” be 5000 years old, compared to visual art, music and dance but can illicit awe in its own powerful way, tapping into our awe circuitry from science fiction, fantasy, romance, horror, mystery, detective, adventure or allegory. What about satirical novels like those of Chuck Palahniuk, Orson Well, Voltaire, Jonathan Swift or Bret Easton Ellis? Satires allow authors to challenge and critique societal norms, politics, and human behavior through humor and irony. This is the essence of awe: pushing known boundaries. Science fiction is also particularly good at evoking awe, with its underlying big ideas and exploration of possible futures beyond our current boundaries with imagination. Perhaps a form of minimal counterintuitiveness (MCI) based on science instead of superstition and faith. Dystopian and utopian novel—like my novel *Paradise on Earth?*—may also serve to push boundaries and challenge readers more than your average page-turner.

Poetry’s possibility for beauty is nearly endless and a few well-arranged words can make you cry and see the world anew. All these reasons make reading another potent source of awe. Before the written word, people still had language, and storytelling has been an art that permeates every culture on the planet. May it be tales of conquest, jokes, amusing (9As) ramblings of raconteurs and troubadours, or wisdom transmitted through generations like the word of Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha) which was passed by oral tradition. While written language did exist during the Buddha's time, it was not as widely used for philosophical teachings. Writing was primarily used for administrative and commercial purposes. Now the written word is being replaced by videos and podcasts which can arguably produce awe as well with quality content and production. Still, the wonder of the written word will continue to enthrall our imagination, play with our thoughts and emotions, explore, enlighten our limited views and push boundaries. Podcasts have pioneered the spoken word and many have redeemable qualities including being privy to an intimate, often intellectual, conversation which brings out a bit of the collective effervescence of awe. Collective sex is the subject of another book, but sex and attraction can also produce awe as we saw.

Common Characteristics

Each of these 16 sources has unique characteristics but shares common elements:

- They involve encountering (or perceiving) something larger than ourselves, our abilities, limits, fears, comfort zone and commonness
- They touch the spectacular and special (sometimes the sublime and beautiful)
- They challenge our current understanding of the world
- They can lead to increased awareness (4As) and positive transformation in how we see ourselves, others and our place in the world
- They involve our senses, emotions and feelings, pushing boundaries
- They tend to diminish our sense of individual self while increasing our feeling of connection (7Cs) to something greater

Regular exposure of these 16 natural sources of awe is encouraged. Other sources of awe can be pharmaceutically induced with drugs. We saw that psilocybin and other psychedelics can shut down the ego identity part of our DMN while increase imagination, attention (9As), people's openness to experience (12Es) and feeling of oneness. They also increase attention to smaller things that may normally be ignored by the salience network, where more small awe can be found.

Awe often produces a similar physiological response—the "goosebumps" of awe, as well as can provoke "positive" crying. I personally cry more of awe than of sadness. I feel deep connection (7Cs) often. Awe allows us to see greater beauty and openness to experience with less fear while allowing mystery and uncertainty. It may provide clarity (11Cs) and enhanced awareness. One may also feel like bowing and sharing the awe with others. Awe can provoke smile and spontaneous laughter (even when the situation is not intrinsically funny) which we will see more of in *Beyond Laughter*.

ASMR and AWE

ASMR, or Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, can induce a sense of awe through its unique combination of positive feelings and a tingling sensation often described as "tingles". This sensation typically begins on the scalp and can spread down the neck and spine. The immersive and relaxing nature of ASMR can create a profound emotional experience that some might interpret as awe.

The experience of ASMR involves exposure to specific audio and visual stimuli that can trigger a range of positive emotions, including relaxation and euphoria (12Es). These triggers can include whispering, crisp sounds, gentle hand movements, and close personal attention (9As). The tingling sensation and the associated feelings of relaxation and contentment (7Cs) can create an immersive state that some individuals might find awe-inspiring.

Research has shown that ASMR can have a calming and relaxing effect, similar to mindfulness meditation, which can lead to a heightened state of awareness and emotional depth. This state of heightened awareness and emotional engagement can contribute to feelings of awe, especially when the ASMR experience is particularly vivid or when the individual is deeply attuned to the sensory triggers.

Panorama of Awe

One winter day, I am casually making jokes with Canadian construction workers I meet and greet spontaneously in the streets. One of them tells me a story of him being on a single beam on top of the sixty-first floor of a Montreal skyscraper condo tower being built. He steps onto the beam and there are sixty floors of emptiness below. This is awe. He explains that he has been on many buildings and is used to it, like famous photos of New York construction workers hanging out. One of the most famous is "Lunch atop a Skyscraper", a black-and-white photograph taken on September 20, 1932, of eleven immigrant ironworkers sitting on a steel beam of the RCA Building, 260 meters (850 feet) above the ground during the construction of Rockefeller Center in Manhattan.

Still, my spur-of-the-moment friend admits of feeling a chill (it wasn't winter then) when he walked out alone on top of the highest residential tower in the city and that his been accustomed and securely attached were not enough to inhibit his natural fear and awe response. It was beautiful, vast and slightly scary.

I lived months on the 10th floor, a year on the 12th floor and two years on the 28th floor of high-rise condominiums and was constantly aware of the extra awe it produced multiple times a day. One condo building had a pool, pool table, interior and exterior lounge at the 15th floor and a year-round spectacular sauna with a superb view! People love higher floors—and pay substantially more—for a

reason. In my 28th floor view, I could see the sunrise over the river almost every morning. I could see the sunset over the mountain and the reflections of sunlight on the surrounding glass buildings. If you cannot afford this luxury—living spaces with panoramic views command 18-35% higher market values, reflecting the intuitive human understanding of their psychological benefits—or prefer the space of courtyard, garden or field, you can still occasionally seek higher views for vistas and panoramas. Note that nature is also linked to awe—and lakefront properties or park-adjacent are also pricier—, so a potential trade-off of access to quiet natural setting versus high floor with unobstructed views. When in doubt, be a panorama tourist!

Toronto, Canada had the world's tallest free-standing structure at 553m (1815 ft) for 32 years, the CN Tower, from 1975 until 2007, when it was surpassed by the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, UAE. I have been to the observation tower of both and even had dinner several times in the revolving restaurant of the legendary Toronto tower. Today, with better technology than in the 1930s, there are tall buildings everywhere. I am sure there are even hidden high floor venues or terraces in a city near you. Arbitrarily, I would say that 6 to 8 floors and above can be enough to produce awe, depending on the adjacent view. Maybe 3 or 4 floors in a residential area is still before than 1 or 2. If we want to go big, here are some of the 100+ floors below. I made a point to experience most of them firsthand.

Lotte World Tower in Seoul, South Korea has an observation deck that spans floors 117-123 and is about 500m high. I admit I splurged by having a high room at an adjacent high hotel that faced the surreal tower. The pool of the hotel itself had an uncanny and incomparable view. Asia is home to some of the most spectacular and tallest buildings, many in China, including two 100+ floor towers in Shanghai and the International Commerce Centre (ICC) in Hong Kong with its "Sky100". All worth the vertiginous view. I went to the 600m (1,969 ft) Canton Tower in Guangzhou where the observation deck also has two rides, a scenic bubble one and another for adrenaline if you do not feel you're having enough awe already! Tokyo has its own Skytree at 634m (2080 ft) which is romantic and futuristic. I feel in love anew there. Taipei 101 in Taiwan has an indoor and outdoor observation decks on the 89th and 91st floor. Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia has the Merdeka 118, standing at 679m with observation levels near the top, but I prefer the beautiful Petronas Twin Towers—only 452m each but times two! And of course, one time I had a hotel pool with the view (sublime!) of these iconic towers, which were, to be fair, the tallest buildings in the world from 1996 to 2004. I am a mostly frugal guy, but I do value panorama and awe!

Besides buildings, there are also natural panorama available from mountains or canyons. Some of my personal favorites are of course the Grand Canyon (US), but also the Colca Canyon (Peru), the Blyde River Canyon (South Africa), Taroko Gorge (Taiwan) and the Cajón del Maipo (Chile) where I did some rafting and a full day of horseback riding to increase my awe. I also fell off the horse, but that's another story!

As for mountains, take your pick—or take your peak! Table Mountain in Hawaii and the one in Cape Town, South Africa, are superb. Mount Fuji in Japan is so mythical that I haven't seen it even if I tried four times—clouds can be awesome too but where is the view? I am still convinced Mount Fuji or God don't exist. I have seen neither. I also had plenty of clouds but at least got a glimpse or two at God's Window in Mpumalanga, South Africa, which provides a panoramic view of the Lowveld more than 900 meters down. Switzerland mountains are majestic and the nearby French Alps. Let us not forget Machu Picchu and the higher steeper peak of Huayna Picchu in Peru.

Research suggests that exposure to panoramic views from elevated positions (like buildings) or in natural settings can significantly impact our psychological well-being. Here's what science tells us about this fascinating connection and awe responses. Neuroimaging studies show that panoramic views activate

the brain's visual cortex extensively while simultaneously engaging emotion-processing regions like the amygdala and insula. Panoramic views create what researchers call "the small self" phenomenon—a diminished sense of personal importance and increased connection to something larger.

Natural panoramic scenes help restore directed attention capabilities that become depleted in everyday life—a form of “attention restoration therapy” we will explore further in *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention!* Studies show that expansive views promote more abstract and creative (7Cs) thinking patterns compared to confined spaces with limited views, as well as broadened thinking. People exposed to panoramic views demonstrate improved performance on tasks requiring mental flexibility and novel problem-solving. Cognitive flexibility, openness and big picture thinking provide key advantages of panoramas. All keys to increased happiness. Mood elevation, literally!

Panoramic views, particularly of nature, trigger releases of dopamine and serotonin - neurotransmitters associated with pleasure and well-being. Research by Bratman et al. (2015) found that exposure to natural views reduces activity in the subgenual anterior cingulate cortex (sgACC), an area linked to rumination, negative thought patterns, affective and self-referential processes and shows significant connectivity with the default mode network (DMN).

This research has led to practical applications in places like hospital design (faster recovery rates in rooms with panoramic views), workplace design (positioning desks to maximize views—although status offices may have better views) and urban planning (creating elevated public spaces). Therapeutic interventions for anxiety and depression can also involve panoramic vistas. The scientific consensus suggests that seeking out panoramic views is not just aesthetically pleasing but serves as a powerful psychological intervention that promotes awe, openness, and happiness.

More Wonder

To recap some of the findings on cognition, research by psychologists Dacher Keltner, Jonathan Haidt and others show that awe experiences can have positive psychological effects:

1. Expand our perception of time
2. Enhance critical thinking
3. Increase creativity (7Cs)
4. Improve memory formation
5. Reduce materialistic concerns
6. Improve overall well-being and life satisfaction
7. Help us transcend self-focus and connect to larger purposes (8Ps)
8. Reduce anxiety
9. Alleviate depression
10. Increase resilience

Interestingly, awe also has a social dimension that makes us:

1. More prosocial
2. Less entitled
3. More humble
4. More connected (7Cs) to others
5. More willing to help

Additional benefits of awe have tangible physical effects

3. Reduce inflammation markers and improve immune function
2. Lower stress hormones

4. Enhance cardiovascular health

Let us see how specific spheres of human endeavors can create additional intellectual (and perhaps emotional) epiphanies like the 8th wonder above.

A) Modern physics offers endless sources of awe like the quantum entanglement of particles across space, the bending of spacetime by gravity, the possibility of multiple universes, the dance of subatomic particles. As physicist Richard Feynman said, "The world is a lot more fantastic than any spiritual belief or myth."

B) Biology and evolution are sources of fear to many who cannot fathom we have common genetics and ancestry with other mammals, animals and lifeforms. Awe can help us go beyond these fears and find the complexity of life provides constant wonder like the human body replacing most of its cells every decade, the sophistication of the immune system, the precision of DNA replication and the marvel of mutation, the emergence of consciousness from neural activity.

C) Mathematics reveals beautiful patterns and can create awe to hardcore mathematicians and your average person with a calculator. Contemplate infinity or imaginary numbers, the golden ratio in nature, the elegance of Euler's identity ($e^{i\pi} + 1 = 0$), the emergence of fractals or the universality of certain mathematical constants.

D) Technology and innovation push boundaries and often go "where no man has gone before". Modern technology can induce awe through virtual reality (VR) experiences, high-speed photography, electron microscopy, space exploration imagery and artificial intelligence (AI) wizardry. From self-driving cars, flying cars, drone deliveries of medication, CRISPR gene editing, quantum computing, neural networks, haptics and robotics, photonics, electricity or the simple invention of a lightbulb, there is awe in discovery and development everywhere. Scientists often describe moments of awe in their work when first observation of a new phenomenon, recognize a poorly understood pattern, find new evidence for a theory, or stumble unto unexpected experimental result. Drones can also be good for visual arts with aerial and new types of affordable perspectives and discovery. Time-lapse and macro photography is available in most smartphones along with slow-motion at high quality. Innovation enables awesome leaps—if not yet quantum leaps.

The Art of Noticing: Curiosity

Curiosity (7Cs) acts as a gateway to awe. As Albert Einstein noted, "The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existence." Training ourselves to be fully present (8Ps) with attention and to notice details can enhance our capacity for awe. Look for contrasts, patterns and push your understanding by studying light and shadow, listening to layered sounds, or notice geometric shapes (like fractals) in everyday objects and nature. More on attention in *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention!*

The Art of Nothing: Awe of the Blue

Awe is activated by all the external sources and factors we maintained but could awe come out of nothing? Or more precisely: nothing external. Stoicism taught us we should not focus on things we cannot control. Although many of these factors can be partially in our control, mastering our mind and generating awe internally may be another key to awe and happiness. How can we create self-generated awe (SGA)? With creativity (7Cs), consistency and attention. Key research from Keltner's lab examined how deliberate awe walks—the wonder walks we talked about earlier—increased daily positive emotions. Further opportunity focuses on people intentionally seeking awe in everyday environments and showed

that awe could be found more readily, if not completely self-generated. We know that regular practice of seeking awe improved emotional well-being.

The Mind & Life Institute, a non-for-profit organization bringing science and contemplative wisdom together, conducted research that looked at contemplative practices that generate "self-transcendent experiences" or SGA. Meditation-induced awe is possible and is similar to "externally-generated" awe experiences. Studies identified physiological and neural markers of SGA states. Mindfulness meditation can create conditions for awe. Perhaps compassion (7Cs) or even self-compassion can as well with a moral beauty aspect. More research could elucidate how external cues are not a prerequisite for awe.

We know now that mindfulness practices increased the capacity for awe experiences, signaling that we may not "need" anything in particular to induce awe. I speak of moments of "spontaneous bliss" in my novel *Paradise on Earth?* and am certain awe, like appreciation and gratitude, can be cultivated with nearly nothing. I always say that "I am happy simply being alive". I truly appreciate existence itself and that is awesome enough. The opposite of life is death, and we saw that both concepts can produce awe, as well as being barely concepts we can also transcend.

Meditation-induced "near-death experiences" research showed how certain meditation techniques can induce awe-like states and documented altered states of consciousness which correlate SGA to naturally occurring awe. Like many things in psychology, perceptions or positive stories can equate or surpass simple stimuli. Same goes for negative stories we tell ourselves about current, past or future experiences as we in *Beyond Happy*.

Children Can Learn (and Teach) Wonder

A Rachel Carson, the renowned environmentalist and author, wrote beautifully about fostering a sense of wonder in children in her essay "Help Your Child to Wonder" (later published as "The Sense of Wonder"). Here are a few of the key elements she discussed.

Carson believed that developing a sense of wonder was more important than accumulating facts. She wrote that if a child feels a "sense of wonder," it would last throughout life as an unfailing antidote to boredom and disenchantments. She has 4 pillars to experience awe along with children.

1. **Shared Discovery**
 - a) Adults should rediscover their own sense of excitement and wonder
 - b) Experiencing nature alongside children rather than merely teaching them
 - c) Use the power of emotional contagion—when adults show genuine enthusiasm (12Es), children naturally respond
2. **Using All Senses**
 - a) Encourage experiencing nature through touch, smell, and sound, not just sight
 - b) Multisensorial experiences can be separated in time. (Carson described taking her nephew to feel the ocean spray and listen to waves at night)
 - c) Seek enhanced sensory experiences like seeing and feeling the rain on you face or listening to and feeling the wind
3. **Timing and Atmosphere**
 - a) Explore nature at unusual times, like moonlit nights
 - b) Foster mystery and discovery

c) Do not shy away from "wild" weather or unexpected moments—I have a few personal stories like a partially canceled camping trip due to catastrophic weather that ended up being unexpectedly awesome and spontaneous

4. **Focus on Emotions Over Facts**

a) Feeling comes first, naming and categorizing can come later according to Carson. When it comes to positive that is mostly true and we explained why earlier—positive emotions, especially awe, do not need needless rationalization in the moment. As example, you don't need to know names of all birds to appreciate their songs, flight or colors!

b) Emotional connections (7Cs) to nature would naturally lead to scientific curiosity (7Cs)

c) "If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow," explains Carson.

Practical suggestions from Carson include night exploration (night sky, nocturnal animals, city after dark), weather appreciation (4As)—like watching clouds form and change—, small-scale discoveries—like examining tiny details in nature (individual snowflakes, insects, leaves)—, and regular exposure—routine part of life, rituals, traditions and finding wonder in everyday settings (backyard, city park, grocery store with fresh food and food from a distance).

Carson's approach has influenced environmental education and childhood development theory. Her emphasis on emotional connection over factual knowledge has proven particularly relevant as children spend less time in nature and more time with technology. Creating opportunities for close observation of nature could help children disconnect from their tablets or TV and connect (7Cs) to the world (inner and outer). Encouraging questions over providing answers is the way to teach curiosity (7Cs) and to accept (4As) uncertainty and the limits of our incoherent stories.

One can use Carson's principles to counter "nature deficit disorder" and generalized attention deficit—see *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention!* to understand this fleeting commodity. Apply her methods in increasingly urban environments to foster engagement (12Es), experience (12Es), experimentation and exploration (12Es) to children (and yourself).

Reversely, awe can be taught by children as they are in general more open to awe and less rigid with their thinking as they must be curious and challenged more often to learn quickly. Awe needs mystery and uncertainty and that is the state of adaptable youth. It allows to stretch your mind, and children can remind us to still stretch ours. Adults can and should learn from children to regain their incessant curiosity (7Cs), beginner's mind, wonder and playfulness (8Ps). All keys to happiness children have but many adults seem to have lost these keys and cannot find a happy life locksmith for the life of them.

Adults, why so serious and sad?

Agape

Agape is an interesting sibling to awe and more specific to the non-self we found in awareness in chapter 1. Let's look at different definitions of agape, distinctions and synergies between these two profound states of consciousness and their cultivation.

Agape is a profound and transformative concept that holds significant meaning in various contexts, particularly in philosophy, spirituality, and interpersonal relationships. Here are five definitions of Agape, along with its benefits, ways to cultivate it, and its synergy with awe.

1. **Unconditional Love:** Agape is often defined as a selfless, unconditional love that transcends personal gain or expectations. It is a love that accepts and embraces others without judgment or

conditions. Agape is love without conditions or expectations of reciprocation. It's given freely regardless of the recipient's actions, worthiness, or ability to return the affection. This love persists even when the beloved disappoints or fails.

2. Universal Compassion

This form of love extends beyond personal relationships to encompass all humanity. Agape includes love for strangers, enemies, and those who are different from us, promoting unity and understanding across all boundaries. Compassion (7Cs) for self, others and the world with deep intent to reduce suffering.

3. Transformative Love

Agape has the power to change both the giver and receiver. It creates healing, reconciliation, and growth by offering acceptance, forgiveness, and hope even in difficult circumstances, ultimately elevating human relationships and society. Agape has a transformative aspect or the capacity to incite or illicit transcendence.

4. Divine/Spiritual Love

In Christian theology, agape represents God's love for humanity and the love believers are called to show others. It transcends human emotions and reflects divine compassion, forgiveness, and grace extended to all people regardless of their circumstances.

5. Selfless Service

Agape manifests as putting others' needs before your own without seeking personal gain. It involves sacrifice, generosity, and genuine concern for another's wellbeing, often requiring personal cost or discomfort to benefit others. This definition emphasizes the pure and altruistic nature of agape, which can bring about several benefits:

a) **Enhanced Connections:** Practicing agape allows individuals to form deeper and more meaningful connections with others. It fosters empathy, compassion, and a genuine desire to understand and support one another. It builds deeper, more authentic connections and relationships with others.

b) **Conflict Resolution:** Agape provides a powerful tool for resolving conflicts and building bridges. When individuals approach disagreements with unconditional love, they can find common ground, forgive, and work towards reconciliation. Agape promotes forgiveness and healing in damaged relationships. Encourages mutual respect and understanding, as well as peaceful (8Ps) resolution of disputes.

c) **Societal Strengthening:** Increased community bonds and social cohesion. It builds more compassionate institutions and policies, and bridges cultural, racial, and religious divides. It creates positive cycles of kindness that spread throughout communities. It encourages charitable action and social justice, even if we know the world is unjust, we accept (4As) it as per *Beyond Happy* and chapter two of this book.

Personal growth and benefits are also plenty. By embracing agape, individuals can cultivate self-awareness, humility, and a sense of interconnectedness. It encourages personal development and a shift towards a more compassionate and empathetic worldview. It creates safe spaces for vulnerability and growth. It reduces stress and anxiety by releasing the burden of conditional expectations and increases emotional resilience and inner peace (8Ps). It enhances self-worth, self-compassion (7Cs), through purposeful (8Ps), meaningful relationships. It can help develop emotional maturity and wisdom, while creating lasting fulfillment—(serotonin) contentment (7Cs)—beyond temporary (dopamine) pleasures.

Agape represents humanity's highest potential for love, offering a pathway to both personal fulfillment and collective healing. To cultivate agape, one can practice acts of kindness, forgiveness, and compassion (7Cs). Engaging in volunteer work, practicing gratitude and appreciation (4As).

1. Divine Love: In spiritual and religious contexts, Agape is often associated with divine or spiritual love. It is considered a sacred and divine force that connects all beings. Spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, and contemplation can help cultivate Agape. Connecting with nature, engaging in acts of service, and seeking inspiration from spiritual texts or mentors can also foster this divine love.
2. Spiritual Fulfillment: Experiencing Agape can lead to a profound sense of spiritual fulfillment and connection to a higher power or the universe. It provides a deep sense of purpose and meaning in life.
3. Inner Peace: The practice of agape can bring about inner peace and a sense of tranquility. It allows individuals to let go of ego-driven desires and find solace in the love and interconnectedness of all things—oneness and “interbeing”.

Agape and awe have a synergistic relationship. When individuals experience awe, whether through nature, art, or spiritual practices, it can open their hearts to Agape. Awe inspires a sense of humility and wonder, making one more receptive to unconditional love.

Agape can also be understood as a form of selfless service and dedication to the well-being of others, by compassion, care and loving-kindness. It involves putting the needs of others before one's own, without expecting anything in return. Remember that expectation is the enemy of happiness. Also compassion trumps empathy each time so act/do without hope of reward, emotional relatedness or shared suffering/pain.

Practicing agape through selfless service strengthens community bonds and fosters a sense of collective responsibility. Community building can bring about amazement agape and agape love can build community further. It creates a supportive and caring environment where everyone thrives.

Engaging in acts of selfless service brings a unique sense of fulfillment and purpose (8Ps), including personal fulfillment and contentment (7Cs). It allows individuals to make a positive (8Ps) impact on the lives of others, which can be deeply rewarding.

Agog is extreme eagerness and curiosity (7Cs) and can be linked to agape. This curiosity extends beyond the self. Agape helps individuals break free from self-centered tendencies and promotes a more altruistic mindset. It encourages a shift from "me" to "we," fostering a sense of unity and collaboration. We must make sure the “we” is not bound to a specific couple, family, group, God or society but rather boundless and all-encompassing, in all its nondual splendor, and without undue spiritual slippery concepts to maximize agape. Agog will allow us to test our question ourselves and beliefs even further.

“Most of our perceptions ... are false. Are you sure of your perceptions? This question is addressed to you. It is a bell of mindfulness (...) let go of your false perceptions. Suffering and pain are born of your wrong perceptions. Some people carry wrong perceptions with them to their deaths, and that causes a lot of suffering and misfortune,” said Thich Nhat Hanh. I think he was generous when saying “some”. The overwhelming majority of people (perhaps over 99.99%) carry wrong perceptions with them to their transformative “non-death”. That is why the awakening and awareness of the 4As is so rare and precious. We can cultivate, cherish and share it—always without egoic intent. Only compassion (7Cs).

Volunteering, mentoring, or simply offering help to those in need are practical ways to cultivate agape through service. The act of service is something Tony Robbins stresses as a state we should cultivate and I agree. It involves actively seeking opportunities to support and uplift others. Agape has the power

to transform individuals and their relationships. It is a love that inspires growth, healing, and a deeper understanding of oneself and others—awareness (4As).

Embracing agape can lead to personal transformation and a shift in one's perspective. It encourages individuals to let go of negative patterns, forgive, and embrace a more positive and loving approach to life. Agape can also be used as relationship enhancement. In interpersonal relationships, Agape creates an innocuous and nurturing environment. It allows partners, friends, or family members to support and encourage each other's growth, fostering deep trust and intimacy.

In essence, Agape is a powerful force that has the potential to transform individuals, relationships, and communities. By embracing its various definitions and practicing its principles, one can experience the benefits of unconditional love, spiritual fulfillment, selfless service, and personal transformation. The synergy between Agape and awe, as well as the scientific understanding of its impact, further highlights its significance and potential for positive change.

Awe represents a state of transcendent wonder that expands our perception beyond our ordinary reference points. It's characterized by a particular neural signature where some areas of the default mode network (associated with self-referential thinking) becomes less active, while areas associated with presence (8Ps) and expansive awareness light up. Awe has distinct physiological markers—it literally takes our breath away, slows our heart rate, and creates what researchers call "the small self" effect where our personal concerns diminish in the face of something greater. The advantages of awe include enhanced learning capacity, increased prosocial behavior, reduced inflammation, and improved emotional regulation. Awe can be accessed through various pathways: immersion in nature (particularly vast landscapes), exposure to extraordinary human achievements, contemplation of scientific concepts like cosmic or microscopic scale, engagement with profound art or music, and witnessing acts of moral beauty—like agape.

Agape, in contrast, represents what might be called transpersonal or universal love—a state of unconditional, all-encompassing love that transcends personal preference or circumstance. Where awe creates a sense of vastness and mystery, agape generates a profound sense of connection (7Cs) and oneness. The advantages of agape include increased resilience in the face of suffering (both personal and witnessed), enhanced capacity for forgiveness, reduced reactivity to perceived threats, and a more stable foundation for service to others. Neuroscience research suggests that agape states activate the parasympathetic nervous system while decreasing activity in brain regions associated with judgment and separation. Agape can be cultivated through specific contemplative practices like loving-kindness meditation, service to others, deep listening practices, and possibly purposeful (8Ps) and profound prayers.

Agape = Oneness + Nonjudgement + Forgiveness + Prosocial + Presence (8Ps)

Awe = Awareness (4As) + Presence (8Ps) --- with bidirectional link to Oneness, Prosocial, Courage (7Cs)

The interesting synergy between awe and agape is that they both decenter the ego but in complementary ways. Awe does this through expanding our perspective beyond normal boundaries, while agape does it through deepening our sense of fundamental connection (7Cs) with all beings. When combined, they create what might be called "enlightened perspective"—the ability to hold both vastness and intimacy simultaneously. Recent scientific studies have explored the impact of love and compassion on the brain and body. Research suggests that practicing Agape can lead to reduced stress, improved mental health, and enhanced overall well-being.

To cultivate both states effectively, one might:

1. Begin with regular exposure to awe-inducing experiences (nature, art, science, moral beauty) while maintaining a contemplative attitude that allows full absorption rather than analytical distance.
2. Develop a daily practice that combines both expansive awareness (such as sky-gazing or contemplating infinity) with profound practices (like “metta” meditation or contemplative prayer).
3. Engage in service activities that allow both states to emerge naturally—helping others in ways that reveal both the profound mystery of existence (awe) and our fundamental interconnectedness (agape).
4. Cultivating agape in relationships involves active listening, compassionate intention, speech and action, and a commitment to mutual growth. It requires open and honest communication, as well as a willingness to forgive and move forward together. We can add awe (4As) and appreciation (4As) to our listening and relationship appraisal.

Where Wonder Meets Wisdom

“Wisdom begins with wonder,” said Socrates.

Repetition is safe and promises to decrease discomfort and potential new pain. It however stifles the opportunity to use courage (7Cs) and discover wonder with unrestricted curiosity (7Cs).

In our increasingly complex world, cultivating a sense of wonder becomes more important than ever. It helps us:

- Maintain perspective and higher awareness (4As)
- Foster creativity (7Cs)
- Build connections (7Cs)
- Find meaning and purpose (8Ps)

As Rachel Carson wrote, “The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction.”

Wonder reminds us that we are part of something larger than ourselves. Whether we're gazing at stars, listening to Bach, or watching a butterfly emerge from its chrysalis, these moments of awe connect us to the profound mystery and beauty of existence.

In the end, perhaps wonder is not just a luxury but a necessity—a vital part of what makes us human and keeps us connected to the world around us. As we face unprecedented challenges, maintaining our capacity for awe and wonder might be crucial not just for our personal wellbeing, but for our collective future.

The universe is not only more mysterious than we imagine; it is more mysterious than we can imagine. And in that mystery lies endless opportunity for wonder, discovery, and awe. May we never lose our capacity to be amazed, to question, to explore, and to wonder. For in these experiences, we find not just beauty and meaning, but our very humanity. As Carl Sagan reminded us: “Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known.”

Find a way to build an awe mindset and be aware of the easy awe triggers for you that can be incorporated into your life more and discover new and challenging ones to be awestruck often.

The Future of Wonder

Emerging technologies may create novel experiences of awe like advanced extended reality (XR), artificial intelligence art, transcriptomics, bioengineering and even space tourism. Practical applications being studied include using VR for SGA experiences, comparing natural vs. technology-assisted awe generation, guided imagery (visualization) and further meditation techniques to facilitate awe experiences, and more protocols and practices to increase positive awe's frequency, duration and strength.

Preserving sources of natural wonder becomes crucial not only for environmental considerations but for our common psychological well-being. I had the chance to visit two dark sky preservation areas including *Mont-Mégantic* Dark Sky Reserve where Quebec's light pollution laws were pioneered in the world to prevent light (use and direction) and building construction from thwarting the awe of the night sky above our heads.

Wilderness protection, species conservation and ecosystem restoration can help provide natural spaces to experience awe in common and connection with nature. My friend is doing a connection and awe retreat experience in the Moroccan Sahara Desert for instance.

Practical applications of awe research can be in education, where incorporating awe experiences in education could include more nature-based learning, arts integration, scientific demonstration, and local or international travel. More importantly, the benefits of awe and how to cultivate it daily should be taught at all levels of education along with mindfulness and equanimity practices. We are so focused on forming good citizens and employees with increased knowledge. We often forget to adjust school curriculum to teach children to be even happier kids and give them habits that can make them resilient remain happy as adults.

There are also therapeutic applications like using awe experiences in therapy for nature therapy, music therapy, art therapy, and even adventure therapy! The ongoing research is promising and examines the neural correlates of awe, the long-term effects of wonder and the development of awe capacity. We also see that cultural variations in awe experience can be explored further.

Researchers continue to investigate the role of awe in human evolution, individual differences in awe susceptibility, the relationship between awe and creativity as well as the potential for more therapeutic and non-therapeutic or preventive applications of awe. Future questions could include testing what is the maximum awe a human brain can sustain without saturation and if there is an optimum healthy range or neural limitations like brain glucose consumption or neurotransmitter depletion.

Potency of Wonder

The bottom line is that people do not want to be elated, joyous and truly happy in a successful and challenging way. Most people are more afraid of failure than seeking success and growth. They are also afraid of success and being out of their—or their perceived groups'—comfort zone. Standing out is dangerous. We can turn terror into positive awe, yet most rightfully feel frightful not to conform to this generally lukewarm, half-baked version of happiness we are sold by our parents, preachers, teachers, tech leaders, bosses, bureaucrats, bullies, politicians and our limited-minded friends. Like Dr. Peterson said: “people want to be invisible and left alone.” They want relative emotional stability (not equanimity, but what they deem acceptable highs and lows) and more importantly to avoid suffering—instead of being happy. Avoidance is the opposite of acceptance. Avoidance gives instead illusion of safety while acceptance includes discomfort and gives long-term reduced suffering in, duration, quantity and quality. The awakening to happiness uses hard-earned acute awareness and acceptance training reduce suffering

in any situation. Then appreciation and awe can lead to the pinnacle of happiness, not just less stress, discomfort, depression or suffering.

Awe like appreciation (4As) is underappreciated in psychology happiness literature, although known to be a profound window to wisdom, connection (7Cs) and awareness (4As) around the world for centuries.

Make a creative awe journal and list the things you can train your brain to find the awe in. Write, record sounds or your voice, take pictures or videos—not just to post on social media. Create your own daily awe moments! Awe inspired my creativity (7Cs), so here is some closing poetry.

*Awe is here
Both far and near
Small and to a grandiose scale
A performance on trapeze
A God we must appease
Have no fear, foster courage
Awe is a neologism or a fondness for words in common usage
Awe is comedy
Wonder is an oddity combined with mystery
Wonderwoman or vodun deity
The superhero is you in the story
Let go of your ego to find greater glory
Oneness
Community, we are one nest
Vistas with visual unrest
Like mountains or fertile young breasts
Attraction like stars and planets
A play like Shakespeare's Hamlet
A hamster in a cage or hammock near the lake
A scientific discovery
A serendipitous technology
Awe is an ever-unfished poetry
Never underestimate its potency*

Chapter 5: Antithesis and Synthesis

To awaken to happiness is to realize that the birdsong was always there—we just forgot to listen.

—Jack Kornfield

The moment you realize that all the happiness you seek is already within you, that's when true awakening begins.

—Eckhart Tolle

We now have the four synergetic elements for a constant awakening to happiness. This chapter will be both a short analysis, synthesis and perhaps added perspective and critic of what we have seen thus far. German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) developed a comprehensive and influential system of thought, known as Absolute Idealism. His most famous work, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) is a comprehensive treatment of the human experience, exploring the development of self-consciousness (awareness) and the dialectical process.

Hegel's concept of thesis, antithesis and synthesis states that the thesis is an initial idea, or proposition and can represent existing states or established concepts. However, it contains inherent contradictions or limitations. An example is individual freedom or free will as a concept which Robert Sapolsky brilliantly challenges in *Determined: A Science of Life Without Free Will* with neuroendocrinological and philosophical rigour with its daunting and counterintuitive implications. In this sense awareness is a continuous and sometimes arduous process as we saw in chapter 1.

Antithesis is the natural opposition or contradiction to the thesis and emerges from the thesis's own internal tensions. It represents an opposing force or perspective. Another (lesser) opposed idea to individual freedom could be social responsibility, community or collective needs.

Synthesis is the resolution or higher understanding that emerges and incorporates and transcends (like awe!) both thesis and antithesis, often in a weighed balance but sometimes in sublimation of either or both. It creates a new, more comprehensive “truth” or awareness. It becomes a new thesis, continuing the process. We can for instance recognize that a “truer” freedom requires complementarity between individual rights with larger obligations of family, friends, colleagues and collectivity. Sapolsky and my view would acknowledge this and add the increased awareness of not existing any “true” freedom in the first place from your moment of birth to your fated death yet to go against free will or empathy (like I did in *Beyond Happy*) requires a very open-minded audience and more detailed discussion than this short chapter.

This process has partially driven social and intellectual “progress” historically. Hegelian philosophy suggests that even apparently negative movements contribute to progress through the dialectical process which is one interpretation. I would argue that enhanced awareness sees existence “as is” with complete acceptance and no judgement. This would mean no actual progression or regression, no negative or positive movement, only change. Progression or regression, like right or wrong is inherently subjective and superfluous.

Movement is internal to ideas themselves and has inherent motion—even if the DMN mostly gives us repetitive thoughts and rumination. Contradiction leads naturally to resolution and the process is necessary and rational according to Hegel. I may see it as natural but not necessary—some contradictions do not lead to palpable resolutions in our limited view of the process. Moreover, we now know that

human intelligence—intellect and intuition—is far from rational! It is riddled with cognitive and emotional biases. Still, let us do the fun and playful (8Ps) exercise to examine our four As with the lens of Hegel's idealistic dialectics.

Dialectical Analysis of Awakening: From Awareness to Awe

Hegel's dialectical method provides a powerful framework for understanding how consciousness evolves through stages of development. Let's examine how awareness, acceptance, appreciation and awe interact and develop through thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. We will see how it serves (or not) individual and cultural development

I. Awareness

Thesis: Ordinary Consciousness

Default mode of subject-object perception leads to identification with thoughts and emotions. This is a dualistic experience of reality and can lead to intuitive interpretations like the belief of a separate “soul”, consciousness or essence. Easily influenced by cultural and Innate ideas of the afterlife, reincarnation, karma, good, bad, evil, ethics, morals and higher power. More practically, you believe in the story that “you are you, and they are they”. You may think your consciousness is special and you are special (either in a positive or negative way). This is normal. It is just not optimal for awakening to happiness.

Antithesis: Metacognition

Recognition of awareness itself and observation of mental processes like thoughts, feelings, emotions. Knowledge of the power (and limitations) of the subconscious as well as the known and unknown biases of trying to understand the world and yourself with your limiting beliefs, thoughts and convictions. Awareness of advantages of distancing from identification to self—sensations, thoughts, emotions and feelings—and awareness of oneness (non-duality). Knowledge that everything else than oneness is a fabricated lie and that fortunately or not, you are the biggest liar. Your memories, thoughts and feelings do not accurately represent the world. They never have, nor will. Psychologist Dabrowski explains unlearning as positive personal disintegration. “Disintegration is described as positive when it enriches life, enlarges the horizon, and brings forth creativity.” This enlargement can be induced by awe (4As) and involves creativity (7Cs). This can lead to self-acceptance or further acceptance (4As) of non-self (oneness) and freedom from social convention and biologic impulses.

Synthesis: Witnessing Consciousness

Integration of observer and observed. Using imagination and stories, including of self, with full knowledge that they are all stories and nothing more. Fluid awareness without attachment or judgement. Natural presence without effort and equanimity (neutral observance) or use of positive (8Ps) stories with purpose (8Ps).

II. Acceptance

Thesis: Resistance

Natural aversion to discomfort and strong desire for control or partial control. Fighting against reality directly or indirectly. Complaints, resentment and resistance in thought, and sometimes in words and actions. Acceptance of only what is desired and disappointment when what is not desired or expected do not materialize.

Antithesis: Surrender

Non-resistance, letting go of the illusion of control. Allowing what is rapidly and completely with neutrality or positivity. Daoist perspective to go with the flow or Buddhist radical acceptance.

Synthesis: Active Acceptance

Wise engagement with reality, including Stoic appraisal of what is out of our control and met it with courage (7Cs), commitment and action (ACT). Responsive rather than reactive impulse. Dynamic equilibrium with life with aware action or nonaction. Mental flexibility, integration, growth and learning instead of rigidity.

III. Appreciation

Thesis: Value Judgment

Conceptual understanding of worth. Comparative assessment and mental categorization. Taking most of reality for granted and appreciating only a narrow array of situations for a short period of time.

Antithesis: Direct Experience

Aware perception with presence (8Ps) and nonjudgment. Intrinsic and immediate appreciation of almost everything. Non-conceptual recognition of objects, people, places, time, self and the universe. Appreciate with no reason and no restraint.

Synthesis: Embodied Gratitude

Spontaneous appreciation with practice. Integration of understanding and experience. Natural recognition of inherent value.

IV. Awe

Thesis: Ordinary Perception

Habitual seeing and rarity of awe. Familiar patterns and conceptual understanding. Boredom and overthinking instead of seeking new challenges, points of views and experiences. Inability to “sit alone and see the sublime”.

Antithesis: Wonder

Recognition and appreciation of mystery, even if mysteries can later be solved. Transcendence of ordinary perception. Direct encounter with vastness and deliberate awareness of the intricacies, nuances and sublime subtleties of smallness and familiarity.

Synthesis: Enlightened Vision

Integration of ordinary and extraordinary. Recognition of the sacred in the mundane. Constant freshness of perception and possibility of infinity. Frequent perceptual shifts with practice. Engagement with awe as a collaboration, quest and crescendo of new transcending and arresting discoveries, possibly many times daily. Awareness of awe with its physical and psychological features and feedback loops.

The Meta-Synthesis

When we examine these four aspects together, a larger dialectical pattern emerges:

Meta-Thesis: Ordinary Experience

Default consciousness with separate self-sense. Conceptual and common understanding with few and short-lived occasions for extraordinary and extended happiness.

Meta-Antithesis: Transcendent Experience

Recognition of fundamental nature of the universe and more realistic, relative importance of self in time and space through situations, neither good, nor bad. Dissolution of boundaries, direct perception, curiosity (7Cs), creativity (7Cs), exploration and awareness' constant growth through unlearning.

Meta-Synthesis: Integrated Being

Union of relative and absolute with natural expression of wisdom. Embodied awakening including high awareness, resistance-free acceptance, deep appreciation, awe-seeking, awe sharing and awe-generation. In the neurophysiological arena, acceptance, appreciation and awe all reduce cortisol (anxiety, fear and stress) and produce oxytocin independently. Together they are the ultimate amalgamate to awake to happiness, connect (7Cs), and be content (7Cs) with compassionate (7Cs) care (11Cs).

The Evolution of Happiness Consciousness

This dialectical analysis reveals how consciousness evolves through:

1. Recognition (Awareness)
2. Allowing (Acceptance)
3. Valuing (Appreciation)
4. Opening (Awe)

Each stage represents not just a linear progression but a spiral development where earlier stages are included and transformed. Apparent opposites are reconciled, new levels of integration emerge, and synergies coalesce.

The final synthesis suggests a consciousness that is simultaneously individual and universal in its awareness and non-identification. It becomes naturally "authentic", ingrained and easier with practice and spontaneously wise with both transcendent and immanent qualities.

This dialectical view helps us understand that:

1. Development is not linear but spiral
2. Opposites contain and create each other
3. Integration rather than elimination is the goal
4. Each stage contains the seeds of its own transformation

As consciousness evolves through these stages, it moves toward ever greater integration, wisdom and possibilities. The ultimate synthesis points to a consciousness that is:

- Naturally aware
- Effortlessly accepting
- Spontaneously appreciative
- Near-constantly in awe
- Expressed without expectation

This represents not an end state but a dynamic equilibrium of continuous unfolding, where each moment contains all aspects in perfect integration, constantly evolving while remaining eternally complete. The journey of consciousness is thus both a return to what was never lost and an endless discovery of what was always here.

Chapter 6: Commitment and Conclusion

Life is available only in the present moment. Don't let your happiness depend on something you may lose. The world of awakening is full of light already.

- Thich Nhat Hanh

Our happiness awakening journey has come to an end, although it is never an end, but rather a relentless beautiful and awesome journey. What is missing is a commitment to a continual practice of these four pillars to happiness. Hopefully, you now understand these four concepts in depth with their advantages and occasional pitfalls. We will explore the transcending nature of true and aware commitment (11Cs) as we will see here in chapter 6 and in the following books of the happiness series. For now, just know that commitment uses purpose (8Ps) and mindset to go beyond motivation which can vary wildly depending on the external and internal circumstances you experience. We must accept (4As) and cherish change, but commitment allows us to keep our eyes not on the prize, but rather on the process. This allows us to perfect our craft—another 11Cs. In this regard, if you want to make maximum use of what you learned in this book, you should commit to practicing your craft of awareness, acceptance, appreciation and awe

For awareness, you can constantly challenge your perception and previous beliefs knowing you are still far from awareness at any given moment. Pause, reflect and commit to unconditional unconditioning while remaining open, maximally flexible and nonjudgmental. Commit to the uncomfortable and nonintuitive understanding. Out of the comfort zone lies awareness and courage—learn to seek, relish and find awe in discomfort.

For acceptance, be ever ready to accept the unthinkable and unacceptable. Train for the worse or unexpected and the rest will become easy and trivial. Accept fully and move forward with no resistance, resentment, regret, shame or sorrow. Know that the universe does not care about your expectations and trite desires. You should not care either. They are ludicrous fantasies, so appreciate them if they ever materialize—or not.

For appreciation, commit to the process and presence. Appreciate the essence and the essential—like time and existence itself. Appreciate setbacks and learning opportunities for growth. Revel in the pure spectacle and inherent beauty and comedy of life. Appreciate aversion with equanimity and elegance. Appreciate unfulfilled desires with patience (8Ps) and peace (8Ps).

For awe, you can remember and seek the external and internal conditions where you may find more frequent and deeper awe experiences. You start to cultivate the amazing skill to have self-generated awe available as a tool. You can then share your awe and even your tricks (no ego, they are not “yours”) to enhance your own awe and the happiness of others. The only thing better than positive awe is shared awe!

Commitment

As we just saw and hinted to, another C that is linked to marriage and work is the all-important word: commitment—not the foul four-letter word! Unfortunately, if you look at the divorce rate and the current climate of relationship and job stability, we live in an era which I can only describe as crisis of commitment. It has never been as easy as to not be committed as now. We even commit and uncommit as easily as we change cellphone plans, pants or panties. We say we attend a party and decide at the last

minute not to show up. We ask friends to reconfirm, we are afraid to commit, and we lie and omit. We swipe left and right on dating apps. I know several people whose romantic date left in the middle of the date and people who left long-term relationships on a whim.

What does that say about the importance of commitment? Commitment is often misunderstood as a constraint, when in reality it's a powerful catalyst for growth and transformation. Research in neuroplasticity shows that sustained commitment to any practice or skill reshapes our brain structure, creating new neural pathways and strengthening existing ones. This biological understanding helps explain why casual dabblers rarely achieve mastery while those who commit deeply often experience breakthrough moments after pushing through initial plateaus. It's not just about time invested—it's about the qualitative difference in how our brains engage when we know we're "all in." It is also linked to the intense presence (8Ps) of craftsmanship (11Cs).

In relationships, commitment creates what some psychologists call a "secure base" from which people can take emotional risks and be vulnerable—like we saw with agape. Dr. Sue Johnson's research on attachment theory demonstrates that when couples feel securely committed, they're more likely to express their needs, work through conflicts constructively, and support each other's individual growth. Interestingly, studies show that the mere perception of strong commitment from a partner can reduce anxiety and increase relationship satisfaction—it's as if commitment acts as an emotional safety net that allows people to be their authentic and less afraid selves. Less energy is spent creating stories and wearing masks for others.

The science of habit formation reveals why commitment is crucial for personal development. When we fully commit to a goal or practice, we're more likely to establish "implementation intentions"—specific plans for when, where, and how we'll take action. For example, instead of vaguely wanting to "exercise more," committed individuals create concrete plans like "I will run for 30 minutes every Tuesday and Thursday at 6 AM." This level of specificity makes it 2-3 times more likely that the behavior will become a sustainable habit. You can also have an accountability partner like an employee of mine who had a kayak buddy to go with every Thursday morning in the spring and summer.

If you understood the benefits of awareness, acceptance, appreciation, awe, my next suggestion is to commit wholeheartedly to practicing these anchors daily. Once you have, make sure to access the further strengths of attention, attitude, action, admiration, amusement, altruism, alignment and accountability we will discuss in the follow up to this book: *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention!*

Attitude (9As) particularly goes hand in hand with commitment. Attitude helps anchor positive habits and commitments. Accountability brings action and perseverance (8Ps) helps renew commitment when motivation wanes.

However, commitment doesn't mean rigid inflexibility. Paradoxically, strong commitment often requires "flexible persistence"—the ability to stay dedicated to a goal while adapting methods as needed. Think of it like sailing a ship: your commitment is to reach the destination, but you must be willing to adjust your sails based on the winds you encounter. This understanding helps explain why some of the most successful people often pivot their strategies while maintaining unwavering commitment to their core objectives.

One common pitfall is the "sunk cost fallacy"—continuing with something solely because we've already invested time or resources. This behavioral economist's concept is a prime motivator for the justification of keep on going for the sake of it. Healthy commitment requires regular reassessment to ensure we're committed to what serves our growth rather than just staying stuck out of stubbornness. The key is to distinguish between normal challenges that test our commitment and genuine signs that we

need to redirect our energy—or attention as we will see in *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention!* As management expert Peter Drucker noted, "There is nothing quite so useless as doing with great efficiency something that should not be done at all."

Practical tips for strengthening commitment include creating environmental supports (like removing distractions or joining communities of like-minded individuals), developing clear metrics for progress, and establishing accountability systems. Research suggests that sharing our commitments with others increases follow-through by up to 65%, but with an important caveat: premature sharing can sometimes provide a false sense of progress that can reduce motivation. The sweet spot appears to be sharing commitments with select individuals who will both support and challenge us.

Perhaps most importantly, commitment should be understood as a skill that can be developed over time. Starting with smaller commitments and gradually increasing their scope helps build what psychologists call "self-efficacy"—our belief in our ability to follow through. This creates a positive feedback loop where successful commitment in one area of life strengthens our capacity for commitment in others. The process might seem slow initially, but as author and habit expert James Clear points out, "Small changes often appear to make no difference until you cross a critical threshold. The most powerful outcomes are delayed." The key is remembering that commitment isn't about perfect execution—it's about maintaining direction even when the path gets challenging. We want to remain challenged without being overwhelmed. Think of it like a compass that keeps pointing north even during storms; occasional deviations are natural, but maintaining a consistent orientation toward our chosen direction ultimately leads to meaningful progress.

In this case, the goal should be contentment (7Cs) and joy though the 4As—or your bastardized but no less valid version of it. Commit to what makes sense to you now and be ready to improve (not quit) your commitment with awareness. Will it be easy? Not quite. It will be at least amusing (9As).

ACT

My friend Ambar is a psychologist in Puerto Rico and listening to one of my podcast appearances, she told me how much the 4 Aces reminded her of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) which is a third-generation behavioral therapy based on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). ACT is a significant evolution from traditional CBT. While CBT focuses on identifying and changing "irrational" thoughts, ACT emphasizes accepting thoughts without judgment and changing your relationship to them rather than their content. Instead of challenging automatic negative thoughts (ANTs), ACT teaches you to observe them mindfully and develop present-moment awareness. Traditional CBT often aims to reduce or control uncomfortable symptoms. ACT suggests that the struggle to control or eliminate difficult emotions often makes them worse. Instead, it promotes acceptance to reduce suffering. ACT focuses more on changing the context in which thoughts are experienced—helping you hold thoughts more lightly. The lightness of being with appreciation (4As).

Acceptance (4As) + Context > Control

Of course, the ACT acronym also stands for action which is one of the 9 Anchors we will see in the next book in the series. ACT is built around the fundamental connection between acceptance (4As), awareness (As), and presence (8Ps). These three elements work together as part of a broader approach to psychological flexibility.

Beyond accepting things as they are which is crucial, in ACT, acceptance isn't passive resignation but an active embracing of your experiences without judgment. This acceptance is only possible through heightened awareness—particularly mindful awareness of your thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations

as they occur. This awareness, in turn, requires presence—being fully engaged in the current moment rather than dwelling on the past or worrying about the future.

When you practice acceptance, you acknowledge and allow uncomfortable thoughts and feelings to exist without fighting them. This creates space to observe your experiences with curiosity (7Cs) rather than judgment. It drastically reduces the struggle that often amplifies psychological pain. This process requires marked self-awareness—the ability to notice your internal experiences as they happen. ACT teaches techniques to develop this awareness through mindfulness practices. This can help you recognize when you're caught in unhelpful thinking patterns, while acknowledging with awareness that these patterns may have been helpful in the past. Awareness also helps observe thoughts as mental events rather than absolute truths. One can more readily notice the distinction between the observer (“you”) and the contents of your mind.

Presence is the foundation that makes both acceptance and awareness possible. By anchoring yourself in the present moment, you can experience life directly (experiential self) rather than through conceptualized narratives. It becomes easier to connect (7Cs) with what's happening right now instead of being lost in rumination. We saw that you can instantly access a more flexible perspective on your challenges or even see them as opportunities.

In practice, therapists often guide clients through exercises that integrate these three elements:

1. Mindfulness meditations that develop present-moment awareness (4As)
2. Diffusion techniques that create distance from troubling thoughts
3. Acceptance (4As) practices that reduce struggle with difficult emotions

The goal isn't to eliminate discomfort but to change your relationship with it, allowing you to move toward your values even in the presence of challenging internal experiences. My only issue with ACT is this concept of values which I find still limited, too ego-focused, and tinted by genetics and the past including cultural and cognitive biases. I would suggest a fourth or fifth-generation therapy that instead of listing arbitrary values to identify with, you rather seek greater awareness of non-self and keep an attitude (A9s) of nonjudgement (of yourself and others) while committing to the 8Ps, 7Cs and 4 Aces which are not values in the sense of Stoic virtues or personal reinforcement of self versus the world. I have used ACT as a coach and looking at the fluidity and origins of values is interesting. May it be societal, intergenerational, cultural or coming from friends, family or work culture. This can increase self-awareness and awareness of others for couples and families. Still, it does not include biology and cognitive biases however and many therapists and patients are none the wiser at sticking to ego-based and conceptual values with judgment instead of nonjudgment like the acceptance part of ACT. This practice is advanced and useful yet misses the awareness of non-self and nonduality to reduce suffering and accept even more.

The "Commitment" part ACT represents the action-oriented side of the approach. While acceptance helps you make space for difficult experiences, commitment involves actively choosing behaviors—I prefer attitudes (9As)—aligned with your core values. Although there is not wrong in Identifying what truly matters to you in different life domains (relationships, work, health, leisure, etc.), it may also become a trap if you overidentify to any. We will see how appropriate attitude and mindsets are more conducive to maintaining awareness and mental plasticity. Values are stories and can be helpful for change, yet stories can be better served with clarity (11Cs), coherence (11Cs) and courage (7Cs) in the face of uncertainty. Values are illusions of certainty in a certainly uncertain existence.

A new emerging, trained or hardwired patterns of behavior can quickly become unhelpful again (every moment) as we constantly meet the world in the context of the new now. Committed action may

not be appropriate without updated awareness. Another action or nonaction may possibly serve the world better. Values like respect or honesty are too subjective and self-centered. Taking concrete steps to understand our current or desired values and align may be helpful with the huge caveat that they are not “our” values. They are our ideas, like thoughts or emotions we should be able to give up easily, as needed. Radical acceptance needs no resistance.

Coherence (7Ncs) + Clarity (11Cs) + Curiosity (7Cs) > Consistency (with Values)

Still, ACT therapists use several techniques to help clients develop the commitment aspect including making life more meaningful and defining purpose (8Ps). They can use cards and value maps. A epitaph/eulogy exercise can also be helpful. This implies imagining what you'd want said about you at your funeral to identify core values—or potential purpose. They may ask “what do you want your life to stand for?” but remind yourself also not to attach yourself to “your” or “life”. One is possessive ego, and the other is a gift you should rather constantly appreciate (4As) as is, instead of taking for granted. “Do not look at a horse gift mouth”, as they say. Life is your horse gift. Complaining, blaming and shaming is simply you blocking the infinite appreciation you can have at all times and in all circumstances.

Appreciation (4As) + Cherish (11Cs) + Gratitude > Taking for Granted

ACT has tools like making behavioral contracts or formal agreements about actions that may be useful for procrastination or hard to change habits. It also trains you to anticipate possible barriers or obstacles and planning responses ahead. Preparation is often useful if it doesn't inhibit needed action. You can also learn and train specific needed to pursue valued directions. I much prefer directions than goals and expectations as you then change directions more easily, correct course or continue on the same direction with perhaps a slight delay but less distraction, dissatisfaction or disappointment.

Again, goals may be useful to point at a direct as long as you are acting towards with no (or little) expectation. You can track and monitor progress. Commit, follow up and persevere (8Ps) with patience (8Ps). ACT encourages learning to respond kindly to setbacks with self-compassion (7Cs). It can roleplay or practice new behaviors in therapy session making it experiential exercises and not just theoretical. At the reserve it uses stories and metaphors to illustrate staying committed despite internal resistance

ACT = Narrative Self + Experiential Self

The commitment aspect is applied through gradual shaping, starting with smaller actions and gradually building toward larger behaviors. Present-focused action plans with specific “next steps” are preferred rather than vague long-term goals. Some practitioners prone more psychological flexibility, depending on the person and can suggest adapting committed actions when circumstances change while maintaining desired direction. In all cases, regular review and recalibration and frequently checking whether actions remain aligned and coherent (11Cs) are key. The happiness—and mental wellness—journey is not a fix but rather a lifelong exercise.

The commitment component distinguishes ACT from purely mindfulness-based approaches by emphasizing that acceptance isn't an end in itself but a means to enable value-directed (I prefer purposeful) living. Clients learn that they can take meaningful action (9As) even while experiencing difficult thoughts and feelings, which often builds confidence and reinforces the effectiveness of the acceptance (4As) component as well as general and specific awareness (4As). Lastly, ACT has 6 core principles, and the main one is acceptance (vs. avoidance) or versus resistance (as we saw in chapter 2).

The Bus Driver Metaphor

Imagine you're driving a bus. The bus represents your life journey, and you are the driver in control of its direction. Your destination represents your values—where you want to go in life. Along the way, you

pick up passengers. These passengers represent your thoughts, feelings, memories, and other internal experiences. Some are pleasant, but many are difficult—fears, self-doubts, painful memories, and anxieties. The challenging passengers (difficult thoughts and feelings) can be quite disruptive. They might shout at you. They might tell you to change direction. They might threaten you if you don't do what they say. They might stand right behind you and try to grab the steering wheel. You have several options in dealing with these passengers:

1. Pull over and argue with them (like thought suppression or avoidance)—but this stops your journey completely.
2. Try to throw them off the bus (like trying to eliminate negative thoughts)—but this requires you to stop driving and engage in a struggle.
3. Make deals with them ("I'll go where you want if you'll be quieter")—but this lets them determine your direction.
4. Continue driving toward your valued destination while allowing the passengers to be present on the bus.

Easy multiple choice, right? None of the above? Crash the bus? The ACT approach teaches that the most workable solution is to acknowledge the passengers' presence without letting them control your direction. You keep driving toward your valued destination even though the difficult passengers remain on the bus and continue making noise.

Therapists might “ACT” out this metaphor with clients, having them physically sit in the “driver's seat” while the therapist plays difficult thoughts. They can also discuss how clients have previously dealt with their difficult “passengers” and explore what happens when clients fight with versus accept these passengers. You can acknowledge and accept their presence while continuing to drive in your chosen direction. You don't need to eliminate or control uncomfortable thoughts and feelings to move forward in life. This is both experiential and narrative self with serving metaphor(s) you can replace, modify or enhance as needed. It is a to practice skills for staying on course despite internal distractions and we know that optimum happiness is near-constant work, but it does get easier with training—like a marathon.

I would add that this is also good practice and metaphor for dealing with difficult or distraught (suffering, sleeping or lost) people. Drive on. Accept. Appreciate.

Confluence

Awakening to happiness is like discovering you've been wearing sunglasses indoors —suddenly everything is brighter, clearer, and was that way all along.

—Sharon Salzberg.

To put it all together like an awe-inspiring puzzle, we can accept everything and imagine that it all flows together with deep awareness of oneness. We can see the convergences of people, minds and molecules to make “miracles”—infinite opportunities for awe experiences. We can stop seeing mistakes as such and mystics as more enlightened, wise or aware than they are.

Picture life as a grand theatrical production where we often start as amateur actors, desperately clutching our scripts of how things “should” be, resisting every unplanned plot twist that dares to interrupt our carefully rehearsed scenes. Yet here's the delicious irony: the moment we stop trying to direct the entire universe, we paradoxically gain the most profound influence over our experience of it. Like a surfer who realizes they can't control the ocean but can master riding its waves, we discover that active

acceptance isn't surrender—it's sophisticated engagement with reality's dance. And dance is potential awe.

But wait! There's a plot twist more surprising than any M. Night Shyamalan ending in *The Sixth Sense*: the ordinary world isn't ordinary at all. We've been walking through an endless gallery of masterpieces while staring at our phones, missing the spectacular show of existence itself. When we finally look up, we discover that appreciation isn't just about mentally checking boxes of "good things" — it's about developing a taste for the raw, unfiltered flavor of experience itself. It turns out we've been art critics so busy analyzing brush strokes that we forgot to let the paintings move us to tears.

Speaking of tears, let's talk about awe (again) — that delightful gatecrashing of our comfortable certainties by something vast enough to remind us how gloriously small we are. The cosmic joke is that we don't need to wait for grand canyons (yes there are more than one!) or shooting stars (even more than canyons) to experience it. The real trick is realizing that everything is miraculous when seen with fresh eyes. That coffee cup you're holding? It contains atoms forged in the hearts of dying stars. That "ordinary" breath you just took? It's part of the same atmosphere that dinosaurs once breathed. Mind-bending wonder isn't the exception—it's the rule we've forgotten to notice.

Here's where our journey gets interesting: these aren't just nice philosophical ideas to contemplate while sipping tea and feeling enlightened. They're practical tools for transformation, each one reinforcing the others in an upward spiral of awakening. When acceptance meets appreciation, when awe dances with understanding, we discover something extraordinary: we can be both the cosmic consciousness marveling at existence AND the human being who still needs to remember to take out the trash. It's not about escaping the ordinary— it's about finding the extraordinary hiding within it. Trash is awe and a miracle like an mandarin.

So dear reader, as you close these pages, remember that you are not just learning new concepts—you're remembering how to be fully alive and live happily in any situation. The path ahead isn't about becoming something different; it's about unbecoming everything that obscures your natural capacity for wonder, acceptance, and appreciation. And while this might sound like serious business, don't forget to laugh at the cosmic comedy of it all. After all, we're tiny specks of stardust trying to understand the universe while being the universe trying to understand itself. How's that for an awe-inspiring punchline? Now go forth and let your enlightened vision transform both the mundane and magnificent into one grand adventure of awakened living. Now that you have the four Aces up your sleeves—and they are legal and helpful—use them in the poker game of life as often as possible.

Like a lotus flower that grows out of the mud and blossoms above the muddy water surface, we can rise above our defilements and sufferings of life through practices of mindfulness and awaken to happiness.

—Gautama Buddha

Thank you, Buddha, and we can replace the buzzword mindfulness—which has its own complementary merits as seen throughout the book and especially in chapter 1—by the forward-looking fours Aces and we can start to be both more awake and happier. I am not competing with Buddha, by the way. This writer's ego is long lost in the stunning and gorgeous oneness, so he is no better, nor worse, than the wise man whom many admire—although the writer is alive at the time of writing and the wise man dead (although we learned there is no life or death in chapter 4). Very soon they will both be: transformed. I accept death and also non-death. I do not seek admiration or praise. I appreciate all, even

criticism. I do not claim to be more altruistic than others either, although altruism is something I practice and will dive into further in the follow-up book *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention!* See you there and be aware and awesome until then. And don't forget to dance.

Chapter 7: Sober Serenity Together

When you no longer have those wounds in the emotional body, the boundaries disappear, and you start to see everything as it is, not according to your belief system.

When you open your eyes and you don't have those wounds, you become a skeptic—not to increase your personal importance by telling everyone how intelligent you are, or to make fun of people who believe in all these lies. No, when you awake, you become a skeptic because it's clear in your eyes, you are awake, and everything become obvious.

When you awake, you cross a line of no return, and you never see the world in the same way. You are still dreaming—because you cannot avoid dreaming, because dreaming is the function of the mind—but the difference is that you know it's a dream. Knowing that, you can enjoy the dream or suffer the dream. That depends on you.

The awakening is like being at a party where there are thousands of people and everyone is drunk except you. You are the only sober person in the party. This is the awakening, because the truth is that most humans see the world through their emotional wounds, through their emotional poison. They don't have the awareness that they are living in a dream of hell. They aren't aware that they are living in a dream just as fish swimming in water are not aware that they are living in water.

When we awake and we are the only sober person in the party where everyone is drunk, we can have compassion because we were drunk too. We don't need to judge (...)

Two people who are sober in a party can have more fun. Three people who are sober is even better. Begin with you. Then others will start to change until the whole dream, the whole party is sober.

—Don Miguel Ruiz, *The Mastery of Love*

We saw in chapter 1 that most people are sleeping. Awakening is a rare gift that liberates us from suffering. It can occur spontaneously but because of our biology, culture, education, and environment normally requires constant effort and practice. We can commit to this happiness awakening journey and to maintain awareness (4As) and clarity (11Cs). We can be compassionate (7Cs) to those who are sleeping and projecting their personal nightmares to the world. Sleeping is lack of awareness and is harmless. Remember that you can only harm yourself, not others unless they let you. Also, others cannot harm you, except physically, but when you accept (4As) death, you have no fear of that either. Either you have courage (7Cs) or, better yet, awareness of oneness and nondeath.

Sleeping is a useful metaphor and reveals life as a dream, delusion and illusion. Once you are aware of it, you can make your dream whatever you desire without much limit, except the limits of your imagination and mind. In any case, you are aware of that dream. You cannot have whatever you desire externally, but you can have whatever you want internally—and that is qualitatively and quantitatively much more important and relevant to your happiness.

Addiction is another metaphor for sleeping or being unaware. If we know the effects of alcohol, we can imagine unaware people as simply drunk. They are agitated and may even seem lucid, convincing, happy or purposeful. However, they are drunk with their delusions, desires, aversions, negative emotions, egos and fears. Being aware is then being sober.

If you practice what you learned in chapters 1 and 2, you will become sober. Sober is not the opposite of fun however. Sober people can be playful (8Ps), laugh, smile, connect (7Cs) and be amusing (9As). Sober is sexy. Sober is happy. Sober is not somber, nor is it stressed. We will see more about amusement in *Don't Be Authentic, Pay Attention!* If you want to take a drug or develop any type of habit, attitude or addiction, always think of appreciation (4As) and awe (4As) as two of the best drugs freely available to you. Chapters 3 and 4 showed you how to always cultivate these two and in almost any circumstances. Be addicted to awe and appreciation if you must, never to aversion or desire.

From recent to ancient times, we must remember to accept others, drunk and all, and maybe some will join the sober train with us.

Other people will harm you, They just will.

I think if people make peace with the fact that there are bad actors out there. Some I know, some I don't know. And in pursuit of their self-interest, people are going to make choices that hurt me (...)

If you can live with that and understand that. You will be okay, because you just have more awareness.

—Evy Poumpouras, *The Diary of a CEO*, 2025

Awareness (4As) helps us accept (4As) and appreciate (4As) with compassion (7Cs). Remember we were either very drunk ourselves or at the very least have the capacity to be. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), historian Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men* (1992), author Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996), psychologist Jordan Peterson's *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief* (1999), and many more looked out how so many ordinary people came to willingly participate in the Nazi genocide. Several of my friends explained to me in detail how people—almost overnight—simply went to murder and rape their neighbors in the Congo-Rwanda genocide merely decades later. See two gripping autobiographies on the subject « *Là où le soleil disparaît* » (2016) by the singer Corneille and « *Il faut les éradiquer* » by my friend Anne Seminari in 2020.

When you wake up in the morning, tell yourself: the people I deal with today will be meddling, ungrateful, arrogant, dishonest, jealous and surly. They are like this because they can't tell good from evil. But I have seen the beauty of good, and the ugliness of evil, and have recognized that the wrongdoer has a nature related to my own—not of the same blood and birth, but the same mind, and possessing a share of the divine. And so none of them can hurt me. No one can implicate me in ugliness. Nor can I feel angry at my relative, or hate him. We were born to work together like feet, hands and eyes, like the two rows of teeth, upper and lower. To obstruct each other is unnatural. To feel anger at someone, to turn your back on him: these are unnatural. To feel anger at someone, to turn your back on him: these are pbstructions.

—Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, Book 2, Circa 180

Be patient (8Ps) and compassionate (7Cs) with the drunk people you meet—live or work with—every day.

Serenity and the 7Cs

Sobriety in serenity is the key. Accept (4As) with awareness (4As) and be content (7Cs) without judgement—of the world, others or yourself. Your compassion (7Cs), compersion (7Cs), creativity (7Cs) and curiosity (7Cs) can allow you to inspire others to become serenely sober too. Remember that the sober are few, so use courage (7Cs) when faced with the opposition of mostly drunk people. Do not get drunk in their dreams and dramas—as tempting and natural as it may be. Create real and deep connections (7Cs) by:

1. Refraining from focus on superficial interactions or taking things personally (ego)
2. Reframing from negative and neutral to positive
3. Detaching from any individual or collective ego identities (that means cultural, country, family)
4. Delighting in life and existence itself

The roots and manifestations of ego are manifold. Be aware of them in words as simple as “my”, “our”. Use communication and better words to express the aware and sober world you see. More on communication in the happiness series.

Start with your close relationships. Start with your romantic or business partner and give generously without expectation. Start with your family and appreciate all and everyone. Be sober at work and do not play the gossip, power or politics game. Build, care (11Cs) and share and perhaps you can help a community to become sober without blame, shame, pressure, or excessive praise. Delectation and enjoyment are everywhere. Go and dance in the rain, sun, snow, sandstorm, overcast, hail.

Unlearn to uncover hidden happiness. Accept without judgement. Appreciate without reason. Find awe experiences constantly and share your happiness awakening journey.

Once born into this adulthood, all of life becomes about growth and discovery. The universe is the playground of the Human Adult (...) wandering, exploring and playing. It's about living life and fulfilling potential without limits. All the good things that can be said about enlightenment and religion and spirituality are natural qualities of Human Adulthood, manifestation of desires, flow and effortless functioning, positive emotions that are not fear-based such as awe and gratitude and agape, which reflects an understanding of the connectedness of things, This is obviously what everyone really wants...

—Jed McKenna

Human Adulthood is the awareness of oneness we saw in chapter one. Be an Adult and relearn how to play (replay?) with more wisdom and awareness. Accept, appreciate and find your daily deep and light awe states. I may or may not know you, still know that I deeply appreciate you.

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