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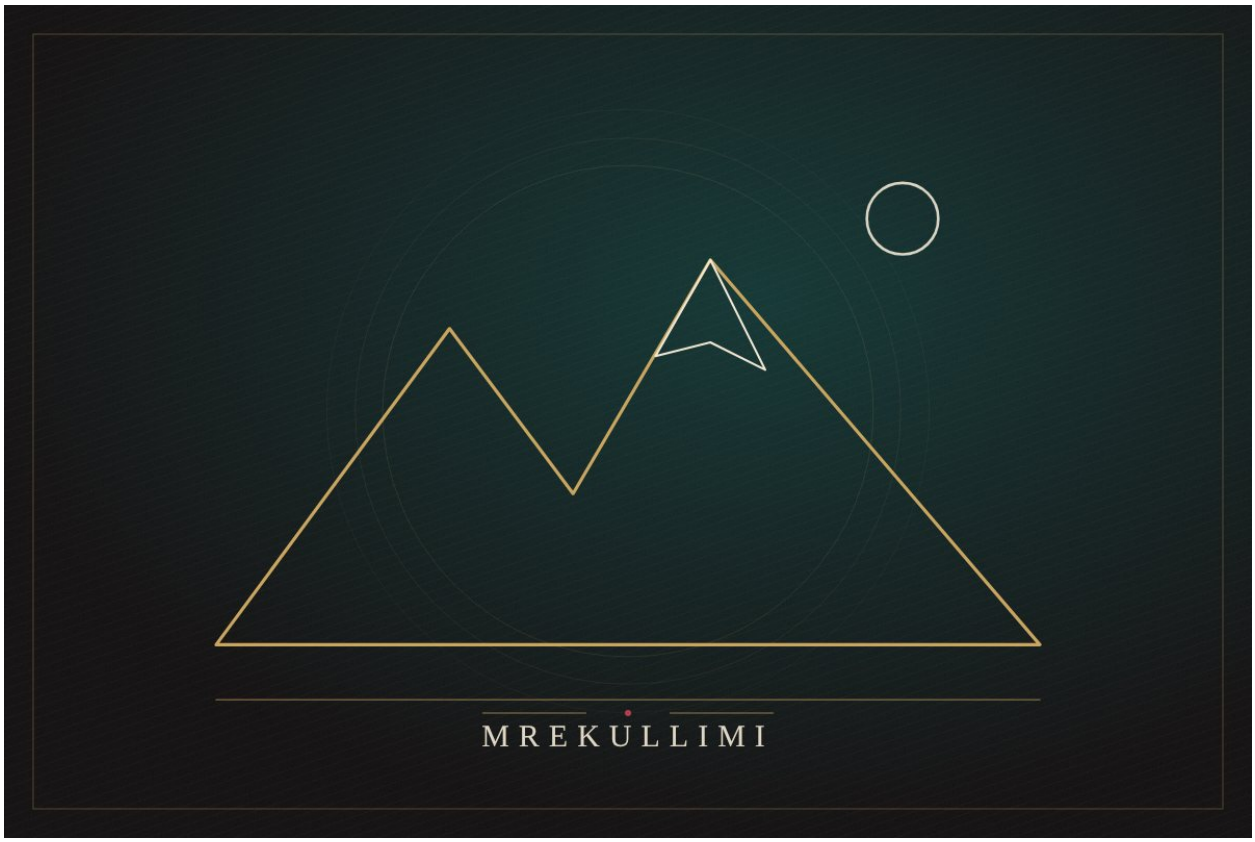
Awareness

Awe: the emotion that makes us feel small, and more connected

How Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt defined it (2003), what the "awe walks" study found (2022) and where to look for it

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Translated from the Albanian original by the editors.



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Perhaps you have felt it in the Albanian Alps, before Valbona or Theth. Or on a summer night, looking at the Milky Way far from the city lights. Or listening to an iso-polyphonic song at a wedding. It is a special feeling: something vast before you, and you, suddenly, small.

The definition

In 2003 the psychologists Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt proposed a definition of awe with two main elements:

- **Vastness:** encountering something very large, physically (a mountain, the ocean) or in other ways (an idea, an act of courage, a work of art).
- **The need for accommodation:** the experience does not fit easily into the way we understand the world; it pushes us to expand that understanding.

Awe walks

In 2022 a group of researchers led by Virginia Sturm at the University of California, San Francisco, asked about 50 older adults to take a 15-minute walk each week for eight weeks. Half were told simply to walk. The other half were told to look during the walk for things that filled them with awe: light through leaves, the size of trees, the details of a flower.

Those who took "awe walks" reported more positive emotions and less distress during the day. Interestingly, in the photographs they took during their walks, they increasingly placed themselves in a smaller part of the frame and the landscape in the larger part, a sign of what researchers call the "small self". The study was small, but the finding is interesting.

> *Awe does not diminish us. It reminds us that we are part of something larger than our worries.*

Why it matters

Other studies have linked awe with more generosity, more curiosity and a stronger sense of connection with others. The proposed explanation: when we feel smaller, our personal worries take up less room, and there is more space for others and for the world.

The eucalyptus trees

In 2015 Paul Piff and colleagues carried out a simple experiment on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley. One group of students was told to look for one minute at a grove of very tall eucalyptus trees, some of which reached more than 60 metres. Another group looked for the same time at an ordinary building. Then a person passing by "accidentally" dropped some pens. The students who had looked at the trees picked up more pens to help. The authors linked this to the sense of a "small self" that awe brings.

Time that stretches

Melanie Rudd, Kathleen Vohs and Jennifer Aaker showed in 2012 that awe can also change our perception of time. Participants who watched a video with breathtaking scenes, such as huge waterfalls and whales, reported feeling as if they had more time available and were less impatient, compared with those who watched a video of happiness. They were also more willing to give time to help others and preferred experiences more than material things. Some of these results need wider replication.

Awe and the body

In 2015 Jennifer Stellar and colleagues studied the link between positive emotions and inflammation in the body. They measured how often students experienced various positive emotions and the level of a protein called interleukin-6, which is linked to inflammation. Of all the positive emotions, awe had the strongest link with lower levels of this protein. The study was correlational and does not prove that awe lowers inflammation, but it opens an interesting question about the link between emotions and physical health.

The Earth from space

Some of the strongest descriptions of awe come from astronauts. Many of them have said that when they saw the Earth from space, small and fragile, without visible borders between countries, they felt deeply connected to all of humanity. The writer Frank White called this experience the **overview effect**. In 2016 David Yaden and colleagues analysed astronauts' accounts and found that they consistently contained the elements of awe: a sense of vastness and a need to revise the way they saw the world.

The sublime among philosophers

Before psychologists, philosophers had written about this feeling under the name of **the sublime**. In 1757 the Irish philosopher Edmund Burke published an essay in which he distinguished the beautiful, which pleases us with harmony and gentleness, from the sublime, which overwhelms us with vastness, power and infinity, and which often contains a measure of fear as well. Storms, high mountains and the endless ocean were for him examples of the sublime. Keltner and Haidt acknowledge this tradition as one of the roots of their modern definition.

Where to look for it

1. **In nature:** a walk without your phone, deliberately looking for something vast or beautiful.

2. **In the sky:** a night away from lights, looking at the stars for a few minutes.
3. **In art and music:** a concert, a museum, a song that moves you.
4. **In people:** stories of extraordinary courage, kindness or dedication.
5. **In small things:** awe does not always require mountains; we can find it in the details of a leaf.

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