Beautiful and terrifying, awe moves us outside ourselves

One elusive emotion reveals that individuals aren't the center of the universe. Then, it makes us feel calmer, more connected and happier

Robin Chenoweth: Erik Porfeli and Sara Owens work at the same college, but on opposite sides of the Ohio State University campus. They have never met. But, ironically, weirdly, they each describe a singular moment that impacted their lives in starkly similar ways. Sara was 12 and sitting in farm field. Erik was with his wife, journeying at night to the top of Mount Hilo, in Hawaii.

Erik Porfeli: The ocean has this way of cleaning dust out of the air as air runs over it. … As you're driving up, it's a terribly windy road. … We actually had to drive through the clouds.

Sara Owens: My parents had moved to Nebraska. There's no houses; there's just this giant field. And we had just moved from Philadelphia. So, we're, we're from the East Coast.

Erik Porfeli: So, when we broke through the cloud layer, like looking out the window. And we're like, oh, wow, the sky's so clear. But the moon was up. So, there was moonlight that was obscuring our view. You don't appreciate that so much…

Sara Owens: I had never seen stars like you see stars out in Nebraska. And I'm in this field, like this huge field. And I could point out like, all the constellations like … I was just like, this is amazing. … And I just remember thinking, this is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. And I felt so small…

Erik Porfeli: Visually, it went from a lot of stars and darkness to virtually no darkness and all stars. It almost had this appearance of like a carpet of stars. And when that happened, I remember having this, just this experience of, I guess of awe, which was to suggest that gosh, I'm like so small. We're all just so small. The whole planet is so small and insignificant in the context of this universe. And even, though, intellectually…

Sara Owens: And I felt so small, like the tiniest…like I could just be squished. … There's so many people. There's so many people, and I'm just one person. And everything is just so much bigger than me. Like, that's how I, that's how I felt.

Robin Chenoweth: Twenty years ago, the first research done on awe called it a little-studied emotion "on the upper reaches of pleasure and on the boundary of fear." Those self-transcendent, goose-bump moments that shift attention away from ourselves and make us feel connected to something much larger. What's more, awe and its perceived vastness come to humans in a variety of ways, and because those events are so wondrous, so inexplicable, they force us to reorder our thinking, shifting our mental structures in ways that makes us more calm, more creative, more compassionate and more inspired to take risks that lead to discovery. In this episode of the Ohio State University Inspire Podcast, we talk to six people about their experiences with awe, and the ways it impacts their work and their everyday living. And because music in its variety of forms can transport us to moments of awe, we're including with their stories the songs that make these faculty and staff members connect with the sublime. I'm Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer. Meghan Beery is our student intern. Inspire is a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology.

Robin Chenoweth: The science behind one of our most mysterious and seemingly elusive emotions is quite new. But artists, writers and musicians have endeavored to capture and translate awe for hundreds, even thousands of years.

Don Pope-Davis: I remember the first time I was in the Sistine Chapel.

Robin Chenoweth: Here's Don-Pope-Davis, a psychologist and dean of the College of Education and Human Ecology, describing seeing Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* for the first time.

Don Pope-Davis: There weren't a lot of people in that moment. … It was that point of the painting, where God and man interact, and in believing in that moment that I am in that space.

Robin Chenoweth: Where they touched fingers.

Don Pope-Davis: Where they touch fingers. And I wanted to stay and take it all in. And it just blew me away.

Robin Chenoweth: What we now know about awe is that it lowers the heart rate. Its facial expressions — open mouth, wide eyes and upturned eyebrows — are different than those of other positive emotions. It compels people to be more generous, less materialistic, less impatient. And according to Dacher Keltner, who has conducted dozens of studies investigating people's awe experiences, awe comes in different "flavors," and is kicked into motion by eight different "wonders." Art, or visual design, is one. Music is another.

Don Pope Davis: Some of those experiences are spiritual, they can be spiritual through the singing or hearing of a song. One of the things that brings me to tears every year is Handel's *Messiah*. There is a moment in that Messiah, where you think of the Divine, or you think of something bigger than yourself. Now the one that really gets me is the R and B version of Handel's *Messiah*. Because you want to get up and start dancing. And you want to be filled with the spirit of the experience.

Hallelujah! Chorus Handel, Quincy Jones: *Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!*

Robin Chenoweth: Moral beauty — seeing acts of kindness, courage, strength and overcoming in others — is another point of awe and wonder. And that influence can be quite powerful. Sociologist Max

Weber wrote that charismatic leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi can stir awe and reorient people to acts of heroism and self-sacrifice.

Don Pope-Davis: It may be hearing a speaker say something that hits you in the heart and you say I want to be more like them. I want to have an encounter. Think of the speakers you've heard over your lifetime. And after the speaker is over, you want to hang around, not just to meet the person, but to be in their presence. Because you felt in that moment while they were speaking and engaging with you, that something connected and you don't want to lose it in that moment.

Robin Chenoweth: You want to hang on to it.

Don Pope-Davis: You want to hang on to it because of human predicament. We know what our lives are like. And so those are the moments when you say, I am inspired. How do I hold on to it and what do I do about that?

Robin Chenoweth: Can you tell me a speaker who did that for you?

Don Pope-Davis: I'm still moved by MLK's *I Have a Dream* speech.

Martin Luther King Jr.: I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

Robin Chenoweth: Also, author and activist Bryan Stevenson.

Don Pope-Davis: He did this commencement address this past May.

Bryan Stevenson: Let your guide be your hopefulness. Believe things you haven't seen. Believe you make a difference in the world. Sometimes some of you are going to have to stand up even when people say sit down. Some of you are going to have to speak even when people say be quiet, but you can do it knowing there is a community of people, hopeful people who have made it possible for you to be here, including your family.

Don Pope-Davis: I got the chance to see him and I made contact. I knew who he was because I had seen his work and seen some of the things he was trying to do.

Robin Chenoweth: Was he as charismatic in his, his demeanor as he was when he was a speaker?

Don Pope-Davis: No, he was very, very measured in his disposition. And it was when he got on that stage that he became animated, and pushed us to, to do something that we are called to do in our current society.

Bryan Stevenson: To change the world, we are going to have to do uncomfortable things. We are going to have to do inconvenient things. And I hate saying this on your graduation day, because I know as human beings, we are psychologically programmed to do what's comfortable. And there's nothing wrong with comfort. But to change the world, to increase the justice, we're going to have to be willing, sometimes, to do uncomfortable things.

Robin Chenoweth: You always talk about the motivation for change.

Don Pope-Davis: Right. The reality is that the dream or the transformation does not have to happen in these big cataclysmic ways. The calling, the inspiration, the transformation occurs at the level of person to person: How can I inform and transform the lives of the people around me? What am I doing that's different? What am I doing that is allowing people to encounter the world very differently? And more importantly, what am I called to do?

Robin Chenoweth: Sometimes we see people act upon their convictions in ways that make our mouths drop. That's "moral beauty," the most common form of awe that people experience. It's what happened when I met Sarah Lang, an assistant professor of human development and family science, and congratulated her on the baby she had just had. Then, I learned this.

Sarah Lang: I was a gestational carrier twice; I carried a family's first child and their second child. … We knew a number of folks that struggled with fertility issues, and we were so lucky. Both times we decided we wanted to have a child. Within one to two months of making that decision, we were pregnant, and it was uncomplicated. And I think that was another key force of just knowing that that was really easy for us to form the family that we wanted in awareness that that's not true for everyone. … As I was deciding which agency to work with, my partner and I would only pick one that was inclusive of all kinds of families. … There was one that kind of just stuck out to me. And the first conversation that we had with the two fathers…I just knew within the first five minutes of talking to them that we, we were just a great fit. … One of the dads had actually been waiting a long time for this journey. And so that, you know, that really spoke to me. Just that, you know, in contrast to my own experience to parenthood … That for me, again, when I wanted to make that choice and go on that journey it was so easy. And to meet someone who, for him, in particular, knowing he tried various routes, that there were more barriers. Recognizing there were more barriers in his pathway to parenthood. It just clicked.

Robin Chenoweth: And so, Sarah Lang gladly, happily, endured 12 to 15 weeks of daily shots — given to her by her spouse — to prepare her body for in vitro fertilization. By the way, Sarah's awe song, particularly when she is pregnant, is Ani DiFranco's *32 Flavors*.

Ani DiFranco: *And I never tried to give my life meaning by demeaning you. But I would like to state for the record, I did everything that I could do. I'm not saying that I am…*

Robin Chenoweth: Because gestational carriers don't provide the egg, they are not genetically related to the child. But by helping to give that most manifold of awe experiences to another couple — the birth of a child — she experienced the awe herself.

Sarah Lang: I definitely had a lot of moments of awe in the process. … In the first pregnancy, one of the dads would come to every appointment. To be there when they were hearing the heartbeat and seeing their child move and all those sorts of factors was just, in a way, really quite, quite different from seeing it … just of your own child, because you get to witness someone else's joy.

Robin Chenoweth: It's kind of a chill-bump moment.

Sarah Lang: Yeah, yeah.

Robin Chenoweth: But I'm getting goosebumps just you talking about it.

Sarah Lang: Our family will see them one to three times a year. When we were seeing them in the spring, just to see the two children together and how loving and kind they are to one another and just how happy the family is together. And then on their refrigerator they had … their oldest had drawn a picture of their family. … In those moments, it's just so affirming that this was supposed to be part of their journey and my journey.

Robin Chenoweth: Sarah devotes her research to strengthening children's experiences in childcare. Finding your calling, your purpose, seems to be a theme — or at least an outcome — of awe. These awe experiences fall under a category that Keltner calls epiphanies, or "essential truths of life." They can include scientific discoveries, self-discoveries or intuitions that lead to a new system of understanding. Alisa Tate had her epiphany while in a full-blown panic about meeting a fundraising goal. Now director of student services and graduate studies in Department of Educational Studies, Alisa was enrolled in a six-month emotional intelligence workshop, which had her raising funds for troubled kids. Back in 2018, she called me, asking me to write about her efforts.

Alisa Tate: I remember coming to you and saying, you know, I had this really cool story that I had been involved in that has really changed my perspective on how to engage in the community, and how it changed my life and how I thought about thinking outside of myself and thinking of the bigger picture.

Robin Chenoweth: I remember it was a pretty involved….

Alisa Tate: It was very intense.

Robin Chenoweth. Yeah, I remember.

Alisa Tate: Very intense.

Robin Chenoweth: Was there kind of a moment during that six months that you just said, "Oh, my gosh, this, this is going to change everything?"

Alisa Tate: I remember I had a breakdown in my car. Because we were challenged to raise like, $100, within a day. And I literally broke down and I started crying. I said, I don't know how I'm going to do this. I don't like asking people for help. I don't like asking people to support me. Something clicked. And I said, if people believe in your cause, people believe in what you believe in, and believe in you, they'll support it. They'll do it. And in that moment, I got creative. … I was dressing up. I was having fun with it. I was encouraging people to learn more about the organization. I put on some fun, fancy wigs and I wore crazy clothes to work, to really get people talking about what I was doing. I put it on social media. And people would tune in and say, "Oh, my God, what is she going to do next? And how can I support?" And I celebrated every single win, which really got me into this sort of "aha" moment. … That training, really opened my eyes to see the fact that like, life is now, life is precious, and you get to celebrate it, no matter where you're at. And people who love you, love you, and they will invest in you, no matter what. That sort of translated into how I see the world and when I travel and do things like that now.

Robin Chenoweth: It's fitting that Alisa's awe song is *Surprise Yourself* by Jack Garrett.

Jack Garrett: *Take a pen and write this down. Draw something that can't be found. Learn to walk again somehow. You know you might surprise yourself.*

Robin Chenoweth: Because Alisa kind of turbo-boosted her life. She switched jobs, enrolled in the college's EdD program in higher education and student affairs. She started to travel, immersing herself in various cultures and in nature. Awe moments began to be a part of her everyday existence. Here she is in the Grand Canyon:

Alisa Tate in video: You literally cannot describe the beauty of the Grand Canyon. Like, breathtaking.

Alisa Tate: And I remember taking a step back and thinking to myself… this river created all these different layers. All those layers are different times of what the Earth has gone through; it's just like a map. If you, if you look closely at it, you can see where it's been, where it's going.

Robin Chenoweth: Awe is the emotion we experience when we encounter vast mysteries that we don't understand. Standing in the Grand Canyon was one of those moments for you. But that, that's a physical vastness, right?

Alisa Tate: Yeah.

Robin Chenoweth: What you experienced in the workshop was sort of an emotional and a mental vastness. Right?

Alisa Tate: Absolutely. Yeah. … I think for me the, the connection was about how I see myself in the world, and how I fit in the community, whether that is in a grand place, like the Grand Canyon, and seeing how small and how finite life is. And also looking back at the training of emotional intelligence thinking about like, how, what do I get to contribute to the world? Because life is finite. Having that moment, like I said, in the, in the car and breaking down and snapping out and saying, like, it's bigger than me. It really wasn't about me. It was bigger than me because I get to support and see others flourish. And, and the payback and the reward is so much bigger.

Robin Chenoweth: More than 100 years ago, French sociologist Emile Durkheim famously coined the term collective effervescence — the bliss and sense of energy people feel when they come together in shared purpose. His final book focused on religious and spiritual fervor — another source of awe — but social scientists have come to recognize collective effervescence as its own brand of awe. Erik Porfeli, who was astounded by the stars on Mt. Hilo, tells the story of a wildly successful program his team at Northeast Ohio Medical University created to mobilize underserved youth into medical professions. He's now the chair of Ohio State's Department of Human Sciences.

Erik Porfeli: This programming basically involved partnering with youth to identify and tackle It health concerns in their community. … The health concern that they had identified in their community, it was their health concern in some way.

Robin Chenoweth: This pointed to a theory in career counseling developed his mentor, Dr. Mark Savickas.

Erik Porfeli: Things that you've struggled with your whole life, going back as far as you might remember, are these passive sufferings. And to the extent that you can find a way to master them, it becomes a very powerful opportunity. … You ultimately have a pathway to be heroic.

Robin Chenoweth: To Erik's profound awe, the program blew up.

Erik Porfeli: We went from a program serving, in year one, like, 20 kids in a couple different schools, to four years later, a program serving about 2,000 kids across 100 school districts.

Robin Chenoweth: Wow.

Erik Porfeli: It took off like fire. We never, we never aspired to something like that. We aspired to have a relatively small but focused program in some very underserved communities and make a difference. It's not just about that individual. But there are communities that are passively suffering, trying to figure out how are we going to make a difference in our own lives, when the world around us says we don't have the resources? We don't have the abilities; we don't have the capacities. Yes, they do.

Robin Chenoweth: The program became an inflection point for collective effervescence, the awe that Keltner says dissolves the boundaries of individuals, and melds people into something larger.

Erik Porfeli: You hear the phrase, we're part of something bigger than ourselves. And that was the experience…that's certainly part of the experience I had in that moment.

Robin Chenoweth: Why do you think it's stronger, in the collective?

Erik Porfeli: I think because we're emotional beings and emotion is contagious. And so I think that emotion fuels us, and when we're surrounded by it, it fuels us even further in a way that we can't do ourselves. We can't possibly generate the emotion of the collective, as the collective can. And so it's a special experience, a special place to be when this collective effervescence happens. I've experienced it probably a couple times in my life, and it almost has this out of body type experience to it. Like, now, it's not just me as a self-contained entity, it's like, we.

Kate Bush: *Pray God you can cope. I stand outside. This woman's work, this woman's world is hard on the man.*

Robin Chenoweth: Erik's awe song, if you haven't guessed already, is Kate Bush's *The Woman's Work*. Collective effervescence, the "we" variety of awe, can happen in an array of forms. At funerals, and weddings. Sara Owens, our other stargazer who is a program specialist in the college's Center on Education and Training for Employment, experiences it while crowd surfing at heavy metal concerts.

Sara Owens: It's like experiencing the music in a different way. I don't know how to describe it. But it was…

Robin Chenoweth: What was the music? Do you remember? Do you remember the band?

Sarah Owens: The band was Disturbed. (Laughter) So we like hard, like rock, rock music. And so *Down with the Sickness* was one that I've crowd surfed to. Another really great one, I feel like where everyone was super in sync, and I'll never forget this moment. At the concert hall, when they do it, they put down the plastic thing on the floor. … Motley Crüe was playing. So we got up close to the front. They were like, "Everybody jump." So, everyone was, we were all jumping. And it was like, boom, boom, boom. Like, ~~e~~verybody was just super in sync. I was like, this is the best moment. And the music was great.

Everybody around us was great. Everyone was moving together. And just having an amazing time and laughing and having fun. And it was just…

Robin Chenoweth: You felt like you were one with a crowd.

Sara Owens: Like I was one with everybody. When I think of that moment, I smile about it. I can't help but smile about it.

Mötley Crüe: *Shout, shout, shout.*

Robin Chenoweth: And yet, not all awe makes us smile. According to research, about 25% of awe experiences are accompanied by threat. Think of the near-miss you've had on the freeway. Or how you feel when seeing devastation in the aftermath of a tornado. Sara Owens is pregnant with her third child, and eagerly anticipating the bliss she will feel when she and her family greet their newest member — an especially profound moment of awe. But when she was flying in a plane with her two other children this summer…

Sara Owens: They both went to sleep on my shoulders and in my lap, and I was holding one of their hands because I was just scared to be on the plane. I'm just…takeoff and landings frightens me a little bit. And so I'm sitting there thinking, the worst things possible — like, oh my gosh, we're gonna crash. … I know, this is so morbid, but I was, like, I'm going die one day, and I'm not going to be with them. And I don't know when that is. And it scared me. … But both of them were sound asleep; like it didn't bother them. And I love that they're, they're not so worried and scared of things like I was. … So, I found in that worry, I needed to spend more time with them and just soak that all in. It made me feel like I need to take in all these moments.

Robin Chenoweth: Other than having children, no other awe experience has reordered my thinking and faith more than my father's death in 2022. Shortly after he passed, I met Deidre Woodward, marketing and communications analyst in the college. The depth of her courage and the way she channels her experience to uplift others inspires me. Her song is *Somewhere Only We Know*, by Keane. Here is Deidre's story of awe.

Deidre Woodward: Brian was diagnosed with chronic lymphocytic leukemia after many years of being told nothing was wrong. He was very young man, very driven and dedicated, great provider, good husband. … He got a donor that was a 10 match and had a mini transplant … stem cell transplant to try to, you know, restart his system. … But again, at that point, it was really too late. But at least we were given those options. … About three years into us finding out that he was sick, the transplant failed. And we were sent home very swiftly. As quick as we were in isolation and fighting and being supported by healthcare professionals and friends and family, we were put out the door and sent home. … Of course, we had the help of hospice. We still felt supported. But there was just something right beyond that I could feel that was coming.

Robin Chenoweth: You felt his end coming?

Deidre Woodward: Oh, most definitely. It was just mysterious. Lots of mystery around us. Lots of comfort and support. But then, of course, that wonder and question and fear that I had being young, and having two children, you know, outside the door most of the time when we were taking care of things. … They were three and four when he was diagnosed and six and seven when he passed.

Robin Chenoweth: Deidre's grandmother and her aunt, both nurses, came for the last days.

Deidre Woodward: Brian had not been talking or responding for a good four days.

Robin Chenoweth: Then, her grandmother called her into the room.

Deidre Woodward: And right away, he sat up and looked me right in the eye. Yeah, invited me in. I sat next to him in our bed and gave him the grace and dignity and complete… I was in awe of where he was and how brave he had been. And I wanted to reassure him that I would take care of our children and that it was okay. So, at that moment, I could definitely feel something more powerful. And something kind of shifted in me where I could handle walking with him to wherever he was going. And I really felt like I did that for the next, you know, three or four minutes, walking him to the other side, as far as I could. … You read about it. You see movies about it, you know. Yeah, you wonder about it. It's so hard to describe. … And coming out the other side of it, there was a lot of hurt and anger and I kind of lost that awe feeling for a while. It became very negative. I felt very alone.

Robin Chenoweth: Deidre wanted to stay inside the awe.

Deidre Woodward: I craved that peace and kindness and warmth that I felt knowing that he was going to a better place by my beliefs and what our beliefs are. But slowly, over time, I was able to shift that into my daily life.

Keane*: I walked across and empty land. I knew the pathway like the back of my hand. I felt the earth beneath my feet. Sat by the river and it made me complete. Oh, simple thing, where have you gone?*

Deidre Woodward: But I had to really dig deep into that feeling. And thank goodness, Brian brought that to me, and whatever is, you know, the awe that supports us in every day that was surrounding him, touched me.

Robin Chenoweth: It came back to you.

Deidre Woodward: It came back to me most definitely. So, I carry that feeling. Not in every moment of my life. But I feel like the gift was me being able to recognize situations where I can use that strength. … I don't feel powerful, or … I just feel that I'm able to recognize the bigger picture and what my responsibility is a lot easier.

Robin Chenoweth: Death has a way of doing that, doesn't it?

Deidre Woodward: It's very humbling. And that's the gift in it if you can see it.

Robin Chenoweth: Deidre raised her two children. One is married and expecting his first child. One is starting her master's program in social work at Ohio State this month. Deidre applies her passion for helping others by writing about the many change agents and programs at the College of Education and Human Ecology. And so awe, this most mysterious of emotions, can be fantastically beautiful and terrifyingly negative. But in every case, it can be the impetus to propel us, push us for change, make us take stock of what in life is worth fighting for. Here again is Dean Don Pope-Davis.

Don Pope Davis: We can choose in many ways to be consumed by the ills of our society, or we can choose to say, how are we going to make a difference, and transform not only our own lives, but the lives of people around us? And so there are these awe and inspiring moments. … I think what we're called to do, is to inspire our students. Inspire them to think outside of the box; inspire them to be better than ourselves. … It's to have people see those, have those insights, to be in awe about their experiences and their encounters. To say, I can do this, and I can do it in a variety of ways. That's what I think we are called to do.

Robin Chenoweth: To see a playlist of songs that spark awe in those who appear in and produced this episode of Inspire — and many others in the College of Education and Human Ecology — see the link in our episode notes.