



The Awesomeness of Awe

My father-in-law died last month. He was a giant. Truly. He packed more into one lifetime than a dozen of us could do combined. Not to brag (since I don't share his DNA), but he made several scientific discoveries, wrote a textbook that was translated into multiple languages, and was awarded the National Medal of Science by a previous President, among many other accomplishments. He could discuss art, Shakespeare and music with the best of them. The night before he died we were sitting around the dinner table and I asked him, aside from family life events, what his favorite memory was. Without skipping a beat he said, "The first time I saw high mountains in Colorado." After that discovery in his 20s, he became a nature fanatic, visiting all 7 continents more than once (who does that?), hiking and cross-country skiing in Colorado every chance he could get, trekking in the Andes, and on and on.

Why, of all the incredible things that he experienced in his lifetime, was nature his favorite memory? This comes as no surprise. Awe. Awe is thought to be its own separate, complex emotion. In simple terms, awe is “the feeling we get in the presence of something vast that challenges our understanding of the world ...”. Awe is everywhere in nature - from a mother bird in a nearby nest feeding her babies to shooting stars in the sky to a high mountain in Colorado. Awe improves our sense of well-being and reduces stress. [Bai et al](#) found that people who experience awe on a daily basis report lower levels of daily stress. [Anderson et al](#) also found decreases in stress and an improved sense of well-being in college students, underserved youth and military veterans who experienced awe while whitewater rafting. And [Rudd et al](#) showed that people who experienced awe have more positive decision-making behaviors and improved time perception, spending more time helping others. [Jiang et al](#) state that the emotion of awe inspires us to reach beyond our own self-boundary, helps us pursue our true self and may increase our positive pro-social behavior.

Awe is the “nature pill,” or [Vitamin N](#), that helps reduce our stress and makes us feel happier and more fulfilled. It brings us closer to our true selves and stimulates our pro-social behavior. It makes total sense that something as wonderful, accessible and limitless as nature would be my father-in-law’s favorite memory.

Provider Spotlights of the Month



Heidi Schreiber-Pan, PhD Psychotherapist, Author and Speaker

Greetings everyone, I'm Heidi Schreiber-Pan, PhD, and I proudly serve as the founder and executive director of the Center for Nature Informed Therapy. A few years ago I was approaching a significant birthday, and I found myself at a crossroads, unsure whether to mourn or celebrate. Opting for joy, I treated myself to a transformative nine-day retreat in the serene landscapes of New Mexico. Amidst the mountains near Taos, I immersed myself in silence and outdoor meditation, seeking a profound connection with nature.

However, reality quickly diverged from my idyllic fantasies. Just two days into my silent sojourn, I found myself scheming an escape route back to civilization.

Transitioning from the bustling pace of East Coast city life to the tranquil solitude of Carson National Forest proved jarring for my restless mind. Yet, amidst the stillness and absence of daily demands, I encountered the opportunity to confront unresolved internal conflicts, delving into my own interior wilderness.

In contemplating the concept of wilderness, both external and internal, I realized the necessity of tending to neglected corners of our inner landscapes. Whether it be past grief or other emotional burdens, nature serves as a powerful catalyst for healing and self-discovery. Like a mirror reflecting our innermost selves, the natural world illuminates the shadows of our psyche, guiding us toward growth and understanding.

The founding principle of the Center for Nature Informed Therapy stems from recognizing nature's profound influence on our emotional wellbeing. It underscores the notion that solutions to our struggles often lie beyond the confines of our rational minds, waiting to be discovered in the embrace of the more-than-human world. Through our work, we aim to harness nature's wisdom to foster social-emotional health and cultivate a deeper connection to ourselves and the world around us.

If you are interested in all things nature and mental health, I am your person. Please reach out. Let's connect. schreiberpan@cmhcweb.com



Maria Monroy, PhD
Social psychologist and researcher



I'm a social psychologist and an awe scientist. I earned her Ph.D. in Social/Personality Psychology at the University of California, Berkeley. I'm currently a Postdoctoral Associate in the Department of Psychology at Yale University. My research spans across different facets of emotion science, including expression, experience, and culture. In a large portion of my work, I focus on how specific emotions such as *awe* can influence our connection to others, our health, and our well-being.

I am inspired to study awe by the natural world and my own personal experiences. One of my favorite awe moments was during a sunrise walk, as a child in bucolic Mexico, I remember being in awe of how the sun would illuminate and glisten through pitaya flowers. Another more recent one that I often recall was after a day-long hike to a high peak in the California sierras, at over 9K feet in elevation, at the precipice of a storm that was about to engulf the entire view of the sierras—at that moment, I felt small in contrast to the vastness and power of nature and ever more connected to the natural world. Those feelings of awe, that I felt then and feel again upon reflection, inspire my work and my endeavor to attempt to explain how experiences of awe, which are often ineffable, can improve our health and make us better human beings.

Check out Dr. Monroy's recent article, "[Awe as a Pathway to Mental and Physical Health](#)" published in Perspectives on Psychological Science.

How many words can you come up with that have the word "awe" in it?

We want to hear from you!

With over 1,700 registered providers across the country, we know there are a lot of stories out there of prescribing nature for the first time and patient successes.

Take a moment to [Share Your Story](#) and get a chance to be showcased on our [Provider Spotlight](#) page.

Share Your Story

PRA is grateful for your donation to help us keep our website and platform accessible to all!

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Park Rx America is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization. All donations are tax deductible. Our EIN is 82-0856734.

Keeping in mind the secondary trauma of caring for others, please take the time you need to recover and consider a dose of nature for yourself.

Stacy Beller Stryer, MD

Associate Medical Director



Sent with

Brevo