



Soulful Home

Finding the Sacred in
Our Everyday Spaces

December 2019 - Awe

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The Welcome Mat

What Does it Mean to be a Family of Awe?

When was the last time you gasped, wide-eyed, in wonder? Were rendered speechless in the face of glory? Froze in a state of divine inspiration? Laughed and cried at the same time, unable to control the outpouring of emotion? These are some ways we know we are having a moment of awe.

Awe is the undeniable pause while our psyches, bodies, and spirits integrate the reverent and wonder-filled experience we are having. Awe can be a feeling in and of itself, but it can also inspire a positive action taken in light of a new understanding. It's a powerful, moving, and universal force that can jolt us from where we are to the next step in our individual and collective evolution. Who of us doesn't need a "jolt of awe" at times in our lives?!

While we are usually surprised by awe, this month we are going to try and set ourselves up to encounter awe in places it's likely to be found--in the powers and limits of the human body, among our planet's most impressive inhabitants, and in stories that stay with us, creating a kind of slow-growing awe within as we make room in our minds for new understanding and change.

As you move through your packet this month, remember that delight and deep-hearted gladness are cousins to awe, and if you don't feel awe, but do feel one of those two very enjoyable and deeply satisfying emotions, that's good, too. You may or may not get that shivery, wide-eyed response to a sunrise or midnight religious service, or the first snowfall, or one of many other singular and touching happenings in the month of December. We can sometimes place a subtle and unhelpful pressure on ourselves and others to feel or express awe, but it's not really something you can force. Ultimately, it arrives as a gift.

May that gift make its way to your family this month, or sometime soon, when you need it most.

Teresa, on behalf of the entire Soul Matters Team



At the Table

Exploring Awe Through Discussions

At the Table questions explore the monthly theme through a discussion for all ages. They are designed for a family gathering - maybe during a Friday night meal, a quiet moment in the living room or before a board game night.

Introducing the Activity

Family members who are readers can alternate who reads the questions. Those who are not readers are invited to share their own impromptu questions. Discussion partners might answer as thoughts come to them or take turns in a circle.

- Who is somebody awesome that you look up to?
- Is awe something you can guarantee that someone else will feel?
- Do adults and kids experience awe differently?
- What is a movie or show that you think is awesome, but your friends find rather “meh”?
- Would you rather be at the top of a steep, snowy mountain, or at the bottom of a massive, towering tree?
- Some places are more likely to inspire awe than others. For instance, looking over a lush meadow full of wildflowers is more likely to cause awe than staring into your sibling’s dirty closet. As a family, how many types of places that cause awe can your family name?
- What are you awesome at? What are other members of your family awesome at?
- What’s the most awesome thing your family has done together?
- What’s the most awesome thing you’ve done by yourself?
- Does lying on the ground in the dark staring up at the stars sound awesome or awful to you? Are night skies stunning or scary to you?
- People sometimes know they are experiencing awe when they get goosebumps. When was the last time you got goosebumps?
- Sometimes things that are awesome can be scary and overwhelming, like seeing a shark up close or being really high up on a bridge or in a building. What is something that you find both wonderful and terrifying at the same time?
- We don’t always have words to express how we feel when we encounter something truly awesome. What are some ways that you know you are feeling awe? Besides using words, what are other ways people act when they feel awe?

Ways to Return to the Discussion Throughout the Week

Thoughts develop with time. Find opportunities to bring up particularly compelling questions again during the month, maybe on walks, rides home, when tucking your child in to bed, etc. If thoughts grew or changed, notice that together, how we are all evolving beings, opening ourselves to new truths and understandings as we live our lives and connect with others.



Around the Neighborhood

Around the Neighborhood activities engage families with their surroundings through the lens of the theme. It's about perceiving your well-known world in new ways. Take our monthly treasure hunt list with you on your trips to the grocery, walks around the neighborhood or bike rides, and transform your everyday travel into a family adventure.

A Treasure Hunt for the Awesomeness Hiding in our Neighbors

In this month's treasure hunt, we're going to seek out neighbors who have done awesome things in their lives. Think of this as doing an "awe interview." Below we've created a list to help you. You might go door-to-door around your neighborhood, or simply carry the list with you so that you can ask questions during casual meetings. And these might not be the right questions for your incredible neighbors--there are so many ways people can be awesome! So, if your neighbors haven't done any of the awesome things on the list, ask them to tell you a story of the most awesome and amazing thing they've ever done or seen. and write that in.

Find a neighbor who...

1. has a living great-grandparent. _____
2. speaks more than two languages _____
3. knows how to fly a plane, drive a semi-truck, or drive a train _____
4. has ever saved another person's life _____
5. has written a book _____
6. can cook an entire holiday dinner (one that feeds lots of people--think Yule dinner, Passover Seder, Eid feast, etc.!) _____
7. has seen a lion, bear, boar, bison, or moose in the wild _____
8. has a famous or well-known ancestor or relation _____
9. has had a near-death experience _____
10. can identify more than three constellations _____
11. lives in the same home they grew up in _____
12. has competed in a marathon or other endurance event _____
13. knows a wilderness survival skill such as friction fire-making or emergency shelter creation



At Play

At Play activities and questions are a way to joyfully, playfully, and imaginatively experience the theme. We offer a brief framework to introduce the game and another to reflect upon it, so that the insights learned in play can stay with us throughout the month and beyond.

Playing Games with Awe

Option A: Awesomely Impossible Illusions

The human body is amazing! We can do some pretty cool stuff. But sometimes our bodies can surprise us by behaving in unexpected ways. Check out these online, interactive optical illusions, which include brief explanations for why they work.

<https://michaelbach.de/ot/>

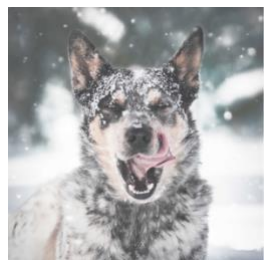
Were you “fooled” by these visual phenomena? Did you try really hard to see them the “right” way after you read what was really happening on the screen? Coming up against the limits of our perception can be frustrating. We might remember past events differently from our friends or family members or might not be able to force ourselves to like a food that everyone else seems to enjoy. Use these 135 optical illusions just for fun a few times this month and let them inspire thoughts and conversation about how the spectrum of our abilities as wonderfully diverse humans can be fascinating and awesome.

Option B: Immerse Yourself in Wintery Awesomeness

The landscape blanketed in snow or frost can lead us to feeling wonder and awe. And that ebullient, gleeful feeling that happens when we play out of doors in such weather can be pretty awesome, too. Here are a few ideas for ways to immerse ourselves in that wintery weather:

- Build a snowperson, except for the hat. Then, have a contest to see who can toss the hat from a distance and land it on the snowperson.
- Alternatively, with the snowpeople, you can not put on the noses, and then blindfold each other and try to “pin the nose on the snowperson.”*
- Give those summer bubbles one last hurrah and [watch crystals form on bubbles](#) blown in freezing temperatures.
- Have a snowball relay race, or if you have no snow, an ice-cube relay race wearing flip flops!
- Have a hula hoop contest (no easy feat, bundled up in winter clothes!).

*Having grown up in Central Florida, where snow is only from stories that folks from more northern states tell, I’ll offer that these two snowperson games can be played with homemade scarecrows, too, which can be dressed up in those scarves and coats that those from the Deep South buy out of obligation and wishful thinking, but seldom wear!



On the Message Board

A Monthly Mantra

The On the Message Board section lifts up a theme-related mantra for your family to carry with them throughout the month. Think of these “family sayings” as tools for the journey, reminders that help us refocus and steady ourselves and our kids as we navigate through life’s challenges and opportunities. Write them on sticky notes to put in your car, on kitchen cabinet fronts, in lunch boxes, on computer screens and, of course, on your family message board. Share them out loud at home and out in the world, where and whenever the need arises.

“The same force that guides the stars, guides me.”

This mantra is adapted from a quote from 20th century Indian guru and philosopher Shrii Anandamurti. As our monthly mantra, we’ll use this to tap into the wonder within and beyond, a source of strength in trying times.

Anandamurti was an early ambassador of yoga in North America, both the practice and the philosophy. Many yoga sessions begin and end with the word, namaste, which in Sanskrit means “bowing to you,” or acknowledging the holy within you. It is a good and noble practice to acknowledge the holy or the divine in others. Talk about awesome! Just imagine how different the world would be if we saw each other as carrying the divine.

And what about seeing ourselves as carrying the divine? When might it help you most to remember that “The same force that guides the stars, guides me?” Perhaps when you are gripped with self-doubt, a sense of inadequacy, fear, or indecision? These moments sometimes precede existential angst.

Winter is a natural time for turning inward, reflecting, taking stock. Sometimes these reflections can turn up daunting thoughts or realizations. Remember as you navigate this month that you--exactly as you are-- part of goodness and creation, not separate from it. That small, still voice within that leads you to loving and life-affirming ways in the world is a piece of a mighty, awesome whole.



At the Bedside

The Bedside activities engage the theme through storytelling. This takes place during the dreamy, almost otherworldly hour or so before children or youth drift off to sleep.

Through stories and the questions and realizations that they prompt, we come to understand the nature of and our own place in the cosmos. But also, these selections invite you to remember, shape, and share stories from your own past, using thoughtful narratives to help your child weave the tale of who they are and whose they are.

The Awe of Our Arrival

How did we get here? Your child likely knows the basics behind this question, but we're going to explore the wonder and awe behind this question; how was it that it was particularly YOU, the parent or guardian, and particularly THEM, your child, who ended up together here, in this moment?

Take some time this month to explore this with a charming story about a bubble and a raindrop, reprinted with permission from author Kim R. Stafford, who first published it as a lovely picture book called *We Got Here Together*. (Used copies of this book are prevalent at major booksellers for around \$5. If you're a picture book-loving family, it's a great addition to the shelf.) Find the text of the story here:

<https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/loveguide/session2/168205.shtml>

Making the Story Come Alive

Have a small container of bubbles on hand the night you plan to tell this story. Try to arrange it so that your child is in bed and ready, maybe with the lights low. Blow some bubbles into the room as you enter, and spend a few moments watching them float around. If your child wants to, they can pop up and blow some bubbles, too. When you're ready, put the bubbles away, focus the energy on the story, and begin telling it.

After you tell the story, use one or more of the following questions to guide a gentle discussion:

Would you rather be the bubble, or the raindrop in the story? Why?

Do you think the bubble and the raindrop were scared? Excited? What else might they have felt?

What do you lose when you join something far bigger than yourself? What do you gain?

Parents and guardians: tell about a time that you made a solo journey full of unknowns. Consider ahead of time what part of the story you want to emphasize--how you kept going through doubts, the payoff of finishing, the lesson learned in retrospect, etc. This might be a story about how your child came into your family or might not. After reading *We Got Here Together*, you might say something like, "This reminds me of another story..."

And finally, the morning after you tell this story, you might write the monthly mantra--"The same force that guides the stars, guides you,"--on a sticky note to put on the bathroom mirror or somewhere else your child will see when they wake up.



On the Porch

Raising a Child of Awe Together

On the Porch supports sharing realizations, challenges and hopes around the theme with other supportive adults. It connects parents with their co-parents, with their close circle of supporters, with extended family or whomever they turn to for love and fellowship. Perhaps this happens on a literal porch or front stoop, but it could happen wherever parents and their circle of support gather and talk over the soulful parts of parenthood.

A Sip of Something More: The Awe of Being Right Where You Are

Author and activist Parker Palmer talks about the value of bringing a “[third thing](#)” into conversations among partners or small groups--words, pictures, music, etc. that can act as catalysts for deeper sharing. We present that idea as “a sip of something more,” a monthly source of nourishment that tantalizes and brings to mind a new insight, memory, or feeling. So as you head to the porch with your parenting companion, don’t bring just your usual cup of coffee or tea; also take with you this additional “conversation partner”:

“I felt in need of a great pilgrimage, so I sat still for three days.”

- Hafiz

Some of us are traveling this month for the holidays; travel can be a joy and a stressor. Some of us are staying home in December. This, too, can be a mix of gladness and disappointment. After you read the quote above out loud, wait a moment, then share with one another something wonderful about being exactly where you are. And share somewhere you’d like to be but can’t. If, in the coming year, you could make a “pilgrimage,” where would you go, what would you do, and who would you bring with you?

The above is a short activity to do so that you have time to sit still together, too. You probably don’t have Hafiz’s three days, but we bet you have five or ten minutes. What is there to watch where you are, right at this moment? To listen to? To let your mind wander over? To see in your partner’s beautiful, loving face? There is awe to be found here, in allowing yourself to be quietly but surely overtaken with reverence, wonder, and gratitude that you are alive in this moment with these treasured souls.



Spiritual Snacks to Share

In addition to your “third thing” above, bring one or two of the following questions with you when the time comes to hang out with your co-parent or buddies. Don’t treat the questions as a list to go through one by one. Instead pick the one or two that speak to you the most, using them as bite-sized opportunities to dive deeper into the role of parent, partner, or person of spirit and conscience.

- When was the third moment you looked upon your child with awe? (We all know the first, and maybe the second. But calling up the third will definitely open up something new for you, and your partner!)
- Have you experienced awe together, as parenting partners? Can you recall one of those times?
- What is it like for you to watch your child experience awe?
- Is awe connected to your thoughts on the nature of existence, the universe, and whatever is beyond human understanding? How so?
- Who taught you the most about “living in awe”?
- Has age impeded or assisted awe for you?
- Have you ever turned to the stars for support? Comfort? Escape? Connection? Or perhaps the ocean, a deep wood, a cave, or other awe-inspiring landscape?
- Can you imagine someone standing in awe of you?
- How are humility and awe related in your parenting? Your partnership?



The Extra Mile

The Extra Mile section is for families who want to continue exploring the theme of the month through larger adventures, more complex projects or simply through additional modalities not otherwise included in the packets. The Extra Mile suggestions often surpass what is considered an “everyday moment” in a family, and may involve more preparation, planning, or time to accomplish. A bit more effort, but well worth it!

Awesome Foods

December is a month full of gathering opportunities to try out a new dish or two that will earn a big WOW! from your family.

[Dutch baby pancakes](#) puff up gigantically as they bake in the oven, and don’t take any special ingredients (Gluten free recipe [here](#).)

Unless you’re in the southern hemisphere or the deep south, it might feel like the wrong season for ice cream but get this! There are DIY versions of the 1980s Magic Shell chocolate topping! [This is a fail-proof recipe](#) that is guaranteed to garner some excitement.

Keeping with the unseasonal cold theme, we could make a good case for [rainbow popsicles](#) on a day that somebody turned the thermostat too high. (Note: these come out super cool even with only three colors, thus cutting down on the special ingredients you’d need to buy.)

And since rainbow food is pretty much always gasp-worthy, you might try a batch of Italian rainbow cookies, [one](#) of [two](#) ways.

Finally, if you are feeling ambitious and want a multisensory pièce de résistance, try this beautiful, wonderful-smelling, [delicious pie](#). It looks really impressive but isn’t much harder than making a typical apple pie.

The family table is the perfect place to explore our theme, and with mouths delightfully full, to try and describe to one another the indescribable feeling of awe!



An Awe-Inspiring View

Some of us get more snow than we can easily handle in winter, but others of us long for the fluffy white stuff, knowing it's unlikely to fall. Whichever your view, this Extra Mile invites you to cheer up your windows this season with a couple of paper crafts. They make the most impact done en-mass, so gather and lay out the supplies, making it easy for folks to hang out, have a cup of something warm, and fold and snip together to create a big, awe-inspiring winter installation on your window.

[This video](#) has a good selection of designs, all made from a simple, basic fold.

Here is an adorable snowflake template that's [based on chalices](#).

And here is a bright, colorful [window star](#) to fold using colored tissue paper or kite paper.

Wild Kids and the Awesome Outdoors

Unitarian Universalist author Alicia Bayer publishes a free, nature-education magazine online called *Wild Kids*. It turns one year old this month, December of 2019! If your family loves the outdoors, or if you're looking for new ways to show your family what there is to love about the outdoors, check out her latest issue, and check out the archive for other wintertime fun. And, you and your child can submit articles and pictures to be published in future issues!

<http://magicalchildhood.com/wildkids/>



Blessing

A blessing on your homes, beautiful families, places where sunshine and moonlight give witness to the universe recreating itself in new generations of children, where stardust raises stardust in love and understanding. As you venerate the awesomeness of the great beyond, and marvel at the astonishing power and patterns of our beautiful blue planet, may you remember, too, the revelation that is your own tender body, your own fiercely loving heart, your own, unique soul. May you find the divine in yourself and everyone you love and know, in everyone who needs it--which is to say everyone, all people everywhere.



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Join our Facebook and Instagram pages for
daily inspiration on our themes:

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/?ref=settings>

Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/soul_matters_circle/

Check out our music playlists on the monthly themes.
One playlist is one [Spotify](#) and another on our [YouTube](#) channel

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Learn more about subscribing
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