

Original Awe: Unlocking Wonder

By Dan Ofstedal – August 24, 2025 ¹

Because the wind is high, it blows my mind

Love is all, love is you

— The Beatles, “Because”

For centuries, the concept of "original sin" has shaped how Christians understand human nature. Under this view, we're born flawed, inheriting Adam and Eve's rebellion, destined for guilt and apparent separation from God. While this doctrine includes divine grace, it often breeds shame and persistent feelings of inadequacy.

What if we started somewhere else entirely?

"Original awe" begins with a different recognition: conscious existence itself is the fundamental miracle. Our capacity to experience wonder is where meaning, purpose, and ethics naturally emerge.

The shift changes everything. Original sin asks "What's wrong with us that needs fixing?" Original awe simply notices that everything—in a fundamental sense—is a miracle, and good.

The Weight of Inherited Guilt

Original sin — a concept first formulated by St. Augustine in the 5th century — teaches that Adam and Eve's disobedience infected all future generations. This inherited tendency toward wrongdoing—concupiscence—suggests we're born with an innate drive toward moral failure.

The psychological impact runs deep. Children who are taught they're fundamentally flawed develop shame and diminished self-worth. They battle an internal "badness," focusing on deficiencies rather than capacities.

While intended by good-faith proponents to highlight divine grace, original sin understandably stifles curiosity, blocks self-acceptance, and creates anxiety.

Alternative Voices

Many theologians reject Augustine's interpretation as incomplete. Matthew Fox advocates "Original Blessing" over "Original Sin," arguing it was absent from Jesus' original teachings. Bishop John Shelby Spong called original sin "pre-Darwinian mythology and post-Darwinian nonsense."

The thirteenth-century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart offered a different vision:

In the spark of the soul there is hidden something like the original outbreak of all goodness, something like a brilliant light which incessantly gleams, and something like a burning fire which burns incessantly.

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These voices point toward inherent potential rather than inherited deficiency. They open space for a fundamentally different starting point—one rooted in wonder rather than woundedness.

The Foundation of Original Awe

Original awe starts with wonder at existence itself. Two questions capture this:

Why is there something rather than nothing?

Why am I here to experience it?

These become affirmations: "There could be nothing, but there is something!" and "I am here to experience what is!"

The first question addresses the mystery of existence — the universe's intricate design and boundlessness. It evokes humility and connection to something far grander than ourselves. This leads, perhaps ironically, to the feeling of connectedness with all people and things.

The second shifts focus to consciousness itself. Rather than non-existence, we possess the capacity to perceive, feel, and reflect. This suggests human presence isn't flawed, but an extraordinary opportunity to engage with reality. We are impossibly lucky to be here at all.

Wonder at Every Scale

Original awe reveals itself everywhere — from the microscopic to the cosmic. Whether we look up or down, left or right, we encounter the same fundamental mystery.

Writer Henry Miller observed that "The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself." Awe doesn't require grand vistas. A single blade of grass opens into infinite complexity: cellular structure, photosynthesis, ecosystems, the dance with light and shadow.

At the cosmic scale, Carl Sagan captured a different magnitude of wonder:

In some respects, science has far surpassed religion in delivering awe. How is it that hardly any major religion has looked at science and concluded, 'This is better than we thought! The Universe is much bigger than our prophets said, grander, more subtle, more elegant'...

Whether we begin with grass or galaxies, we arrive at the same destination: profound wonder that anything exists at all. From quantum realms to cosmic webs, from children's laughter to stellar birth, we're surrounded by mysteries that invite reverence and wonder, not explanation. And ultimately, nothing is explainable.

Living from Wonder

Embracing original awe means recognizing your innate capacity for wonder and connection to the creative force of existence. As philosopher Alan Watts observed, "The meaning of life is just to be alive. It is so plain and so obvious and so simple."

This transforms daily experience. Instead of inadequacy, it inspires curiosity. It counters "lack consciousness" —feeling inherently incomplete, or that you don't have enough—by focusing on the miraculous abundance of existence. Original awe shifts mindset from scarcity to abundance, from what's missing to what's overwhelmingly present in this moment, *and in every moment*.

It also counters "victim consciousness"— the sense that life happens *to* you. By recognizing your unique capacity to experience existence, you see yourself as an active participant rather than a helpless recipient. Each of us, regardless of personal circumstances, is simply lucky to be alive to experience what is.

As spiritual teacher Byron Katie wisely observed, "Reality is always kinder than your thoughts about it." The suffering we associate with human nature often stems not from reality itself, but from our mental frameworks about reality. When we stop arguing with existence through limiting beliefs about inherent flawedness (of ourselves or others), we discover that reality — the mere fact of being here — is profoundly generous. Original awe brings us back to that realization.

Original awe manifests practically in countless ways: A parent joyously overwhelmed by their sleeping child's mystery. Recognition between strangers who truly see each other. Being moved to tears by music. The feeling of connection while gazing at stars. These aren't rare mystical experiences but everyday invitations to wonder.

More systematically, embracing original awe might manifest as:

- Approaching challenges with curiosity rather than dread
- Finding meaning in ordinary moments through attentive presence
- Treating relationships as opportunities for mutual wonder and discovery
- Viewing setbacks as part of the larger mystery of existence rather than failures.
- Cultivating gratitude as a daily practice of acknowledging the miracle of being

As Meister Eckhart observed, "If the only prayer you said in your whole life was 'thank you,' that would suffice." This simple yet profound insight captures how original awe naturally leads to gratitude—not as an obligation, but as the spontaneous response to recognizing the gift of existence itself.

Addressing Suffering and Moral Failure

To those who've experienced trauma, suffering or loss, talk of inherent wonder might sound naive. Original awe doesn't deny harmful behaviors or tragic circumstances. Instead, it recognizes that harm and suffering are caused by the human ego. When someone acts harmfully, original awe asks: "How has this person's natural wonder been wounded?" rather than "How is this person fundamentally flawed?" This opens possibilities for healing based on inherent worth rather than guilt and unworthiness.

The Fruits of Wonder-Based Living

Abraham Joshua Heschel urged: Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement... get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually.

Carl Jung puts it nicely: "If our religion is based on salvation, our chief emotions will be fear and trembling. If our religion is based on wonder, our chief emotion will be gratitude."

Beginning from awe creates openness and belonging. It encourages self-acceptance, promotes empathy, and serves as an antidote to cynicism and despair.

This shift doesn't eliminate the need for ethics or growth. It provides a more positive foundation. When people recognize their participation in the miracle of existence, they're more likely to treat themselves, others, and the world with reverence. And they will see the fundamental interconnectedness and "oneness" of everything.

The implications extend beyond personal psychology. Education rooted in original awe emphasizes wonder over rote memorization and testing. Mental health approaches focus on reconnecting with amazement rather than only treating pathology. Environmental stewardship emerges from recognizing our participation in the unified cosmic story. Social justice work is motivated by awe at human potential rather than only anger and blaming.

Conclusion

Original sin offers a framework for understanding human fallenness, but it imputes shame and inadequacy. Original awe provides an alternative that honors both the mystery of existence and the dignity of human consciousness.

Starting with fundamental questions about existence, original awe invites connection and purpose. It affirms people not as flawed beings requiring salvation, but as conscious participants in an astonishing cosmic unfolding.

This doesn't eliminate life's challenges or moral choices. It provides a foundation of wonder and gratitude from which to meet both difficulties and opportunities. Our deepest spiritual work involves awakening to the miracle of existence. From that place, problems can more easily be solved. And more to the point: when experiencing awe, there are no problems, only a benevolent universe.

Albert Einstein captured this state of consciousness perfectly: "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."

Embracing original awe allows us to choose the second path—to live as though everything is miraculous, because everything *is* a miracle. We return to our opening questions as affirmations: "There is something rather than nothing—and I am here to experience it!" This transforms the fundamental question from "What must I overcome?" to "What am I called on to celebrate, love and protect, as I embrace the miraculous fact that we are here at all?"