



Narrative Health: Examining the relationship between the phenomenon of awe and resilience and well-being

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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that experiencing awe can support people's well-being and enhance their resilience. A secondary phenomenological analysis was conducted of data collected from the Awe Project, a 5-day, online resilience program. Based on the existing literature, which demonstrates that reflecting on positive memories can support individuals' well-being, a practice during the Awe Project prompted participants first to define awe and then to share a personal awe experience. The results indicated that many of the participants' awe definitions and narratives were consistent with themes relating to previous awe research while new awe-related themes also emerged. Additionally, many of the awe definitions and stories included elements relating to resilience practices such as cognitive reappraisal, connectedness, gratitude, meaning and purpose in life, mindfulness, and self-efficacy. The results indicated that explaining awe and sharing awe narratives can potentially support people's well-being, and that being exposed to awe narratives may support this as well.

Key Words Storytelling; phenomenology; mental health; positive psychology; narratology.

INTRODUCTION

People experience stressors on a daily basis, and when they do not employ effective coping strategies, stress can become overwhelming and have an adverse impact on their well-being. An individual's ability to cope involves genetics as well as environmental and social factors. Each of these can both contribute to mental health conditions and act as protective factors that support well-being. Aside from daily stressors, the ongoing COVID-19 global crisis continues to cause concerns (CDC, 2022; COVID-19 Mental Disorders Collaborative, 2021; Czeisler et al., 2020; Butler, 2022), including requiring suicide prevention efforts (AFSP, 2020, 2022; Banerjee et al., 2021; Dycharme, 2022). These concerns are especially worrisome for those responsible for the well-being of others, such as first responders (Drew & Martin, 2021; Mehdizadeh & Kamkar, 2020; Papazoglou et al., 2021) and frontline healthcare professionals (De Kock et al., 2021; Gupta et al., 2021; Mehta et al., 2021; Søvold et al., 2021).

To develop and sustain one's mental health and overall well-being, having a variety of resilience practices is necessary (Bonanno, 2005). These practices must be both evidence-based

and practical to increase their likelihood of use by those who would benefit, including the abovementioned first responders, frontline workers, and medical professionals, as well as the general public.

This study examines how awe narratives can be an evidence-based and practical way to support individuals' mental health and enhance their resilience. Previous research has established that experiences of awe and reflections on awe moments are a resilience practice that can also support other resilience practices such as awareness (mindfulness), cognitive reappraisal, gratitude, meaning and purpose in life, prospection, optimism, and others (Nelson-Coffey et al., 2019; Thompson et al., 2022; Thompson, 2022a; Thompson & Jensen, 2023).

AWE

Awe is a complex emotion that captivates people when they experience something or someone extraordinary and it challenges their current thinking (Stellar, 2021; Thompson et al., 2022). Based on the work of Keltner and Haidt (2003), awe is often described as having two elements: a sense of vastness

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and a need for accommodation (NFA). Vastness can refer to something physical or conceptual, while NFA refers to the need for a new mental schema due to the vastness of the awe experience. As discussed later this paper, the analysis suggests that NFA is not necessarily always present in awe experiences.

Awe has been associated with resilience (for example, see Tabibnia, 2020) as well as being a mindfulness practice (D’Ardenne, 2019; Thompson, 2022a). There are various contexts in which awe can be experienced: in nature and space, through music and the arts, with accomplishments (self and others), in religious and spiritual moments, and in social interactions (Allen, 2019; Anderson et al., 2018; Graziosi & Yaden, 2019; Pilgrim et al., 2017; Shiota et al., 2007; Thompson, 2022a). Furthermore, awe is not restricted to in-person experiences, as studies have shown that the following can be used to elicit this complex emotion: virtual and augmented reality, photos, viewing images and videos, listening, and reading (Fessell & Reivich, 2021; Magnan, 2020; Shiota & Greater Good Science Center, 2016; Thompson, 2022a; Walker & Gilovich, 2021). Table I further identifies how awe experiences emerge and their relationships with other resilience practices.

Another point of note is that awe is not limited to once-in-a-lifetime moments, such as exotic trips to far away, expensive locations. Researchers have also explained that awe can be experienced in daily, everyday moments (Graziosi, 2018; Schneider, 2009; Shiota, 2021; Thompson, 2022c, 2022d).

There are numerous resilience and well-being benefits for individuals when they experience awe. First, and primarily in this paper, the focus is on the positive attributes of awe; however, it should be noted that awe can also include negative elements such as fear and lack of control (Bai et al., 2017; Chirico & Gaggioli, 2018; Gordon et al., 2017; Guan et al., 2019; Piff et al., 2015). The benefits of experiencing awe include raising awareness of gaps in knowledge and seeking to fill them; creativity; connectedness with others; critical thinking; curiosity; finding meaning and purpose in

life; generosity, gratitude, handling uncertainty and ambiguity; humility, mood improvements, and emotion regulation; open-mindedness; optimism; prosocial behaviors; social connectedness; and improvements in overall health (for more on the benefits of awe, see Allen, 2019; Thompson, 2022a, 2022c; Thompson et al., 2022).

The benefits of experiencing awe are not limited to the moment when it occurs or to the person experiencing it. Awe and the other positive emotions and attributes associated with it can have a ripple effect after the experience has concluded (Thompson, 2022a). Awe is also known as a self-transcendent emotion (or experience), or a feeling of closeness, connection, and unity with everything that exists (Chirico & Yaden, 2018; Jiang & Sedikides, 2021; Li et al., 2019; Thompson, 2022c; Yaden et al., 2016). Self-transcendent emotions can have personal benefits, such as increased wellness, and they can increase prosocial behaviors, such as generosity towards others (Bai et al., 2017; Li et al., 2019; Piff et al., 2015; Rudd et al., 2012; Prade & Saroglou, 2016; Thompson, 2022a; Ying et al., 2016).

Previous research has also examined the impact of awe narratives. This includes evoking awe through reading narratives on vast landscapes and the accomplishments of others (Rudd et al., 2012; Walker & Gilovich, 2021), having research participants share personal awe narratives (Campos et al., 2013; Cuzzolino, 2021; Piff et al., 2015; Shiota et al., 2007), reflecting on awe narratives to promote resilience (Thompson, 2022c), showing how awe narratives can support leaders by creatively addressing issues (Thompson, 2022b), reflecting on previous awe experiences and sharing them with a group (Thompson, 2022a), and reflecting on daily awe moments as part of a gratitude practice during a multiday resilience program (Thompson, 2020).

Thompson and Jensen’s (2023) work recently explored the relationship between experiencing awe and sharing awe narratives in relation to effective law enforcement hostage negotiation. Thompson’s (2023a) work also established that sharing and reflecting on awe can be supportive of NASA’s medical and mental health leadership, especially in terms of looking after the well-being of astronauts pre, during, and post mission. Additional work examined how incorporating awe narratives during resilience training for police homicide and special victim investigators had promising results, with participants stating it was supportive of their work and personal lives (Thompson, 2023b).

These studies have demonstrated that collecting awe narratives is an established method of research, that sharing awe narratives can support people’s personal resilience, and that awe can also be experienced when being exposed to the awe stories of others.

RESILIENCE

Previous research has addressed the theoretical relationship between awe and other resilience practices while also practically explaining how awe has been incorporated into resilience programs (Tabibnia, 2020; Thompson, 2020, 2022a, 2023a, 2023b; Thompson & Drew, 2020; Thompson et al., 2022). Like awe, definitions of resilience vary and continue to evolve. This paper uses Thompson and Jensen’s (2023) recent definition of resilience as a collection of proactive, ongoing, and responsive practices to enhance one’s mental health and

TABLE I Awe categories, means, and relationships to other resilience practices

Categories	Means	Resilience Practices
Accomplishments (self and others)	Augmented/virtual reality	Agency (inspiring action)
Arts	Audio	Cognitive reappraisal
Music	Images	Connectedness
Nature	In-person	Emotional intelligence
Relationships (social connections)	Reading	Gratitude
Space	Video	Meaning and purpose in life
Spirituality/religion	Writing	Mindfulness
		Optimism (and hope)
		Self-compassion
		Self-efficacy

overall well-being in response to experiencing stressful and adverse events.

As explained, resilience requires access to multiple practices that are used based on the situation or event (Bonanno, 2005). The various resilience practices, and specifically those related to awe, include cognitive reappraisal, gratitude, finding meaning and purpose in life, prospection, optimism, social connectedness, self-compassion, and self-efficacy (for a review, see Thompson et al., 2022).

Acknowledging that part of the human condition involves stressful and adverse life events is critical to enhancing resilience and overall well-being. This has been referred to as “acceptance” by Rick Hanson (2018, p. 17), and therefore it is necessary to find positive coping strategies, or “agency” (Hanson, 2018, p. 78), to handle such adverse life events proactively, thrive during them, and then recover in a way that supports one’s well-being. This is the foundation of salutogenesis and positive psychology: developing and examining ways of human flourishing (Antonovsky, 1996; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Sharing and being exposed to awe narratives are one such way to practice this, and it is further examined in the next section.

NARRATIVES AND STORYTELLING

As previously explained, awe narratives have been explored in multiple studies. Sharing narratives more broadly has also been studied to examine its numerous benefits on individuals’ well-being (Adler et al., 2016), including contributing to both personal and social change (Rutledge, 2016). When examining developing personal narratives as a type of self-reflection practice, including through guided prompts, research has shown that it can support overall well-being, mental health, social connectedness, purpose in life, and self-efficacy (Agnew, 2022; Czyżowska & Gurba, 2021; Frugé & Drutz, n.d., Koshy et al., 2017; Strumm, 2022).

Individuals’ narrative identities, or their evolving life stories, involve both their interpretation of the past and how they envision the future, which then contributes to their purposes in life (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Sharing meaningful narratives that include disclosing personal feelings and thoughts can support people’s psychological and overall well-being (Frattaroli, 2006), increase self-awareness, self-efficacy, self-control, and openness with others, and promote better decision-making (Bauer & Bonanno, 2001; Dohan et al., 2016; Lilgentalh & McAdams, 2011; McAdams et al., 2004; Reese et al., 2011). When viewed as a form of expressive writing, personal narratives have also been associated with decreases in depression and anxiety symptoms, intrusive thoughts, and rumination, each of which has also been associated with suicidal ideation (Gortner et al., 2006; Klein & Boals, 2001; Lepore, 1997; Rogers & Joiner, 2018).

Personal narratives have been described as a powerful way to explain and explore science (Suzuki et al., 2018). Suzuki et al. (2018) examined the neuroscience implications of storytelling and the various parts of the brain that it impacts, while others have studied how storytelling can increase oxytocin levels and positive emotions while decreasing cortisol and pain (Brockington et al., 2021). Studies have shown that when nurses shared stories of personal growth during moments of adversity, it enhanced their resilience and social connectedness

while also supporting improvements in patient care (Banks-Wallace, 1999; East et al., 2010). Relating Hanson’s description of having a sense of agency to the concept of positive psychology and salutogenesis, Rana Awdish, a medical doctor who survived a near-death experience, explained the powerful impact our narratives can have on the one sharing them by stating that they “do more than restore our faith in ourselves. They have the power to transform” (Michigan Medicine Headlines, 2023, last paragraph).

More broadly, the practices of narrative medicine have been described as a model for effective medical practice, as they can provide a voice to the suffering and promote personal reflection on the part of professionals (Charon, 2001; Krisberg, 2017). Thompson (2023a) suggested that the benefits of narrative medicine can be employed more broadly, and importantly, in a proactive manner that is similar to other resilience practices. In this broader approach, he suggests the term narrative health when examining storytelling and listening in a manner to support people’s well-being and enhance their resilience.

Further, from the perspective of sharing awe narratives as a form of promoting wellness for people being exposed to a story, these narratives have the potential to influence people by endorsing the behaviors and attitudes that are promoted in the narrative (Frank et al., 2015). Lisa Cron (2012) explained the power of narrative on the people being exposed to it, as “stories allow us to simulate intense experience without having to actually live through them” (p. 9) while Leo Widrich, citing Uri Hasson, stated that “a story is the only way to activate parts in the brain so that a listener turns the story into their own idea and experience” (Widrich, 2012, 6th paragraph). This demonstrates that narratives not only impact the individual sharing them but can also be transformative for the people being exposed to them (Peterson & Boris, 2017; Thompson, 2022c).

A recent study gave an example of the profound impact that narratives can have by demonstrating a reduction of suicidal ideation in people who were exposed to stories of others working through their own suicidal thoughts (Franz et al., 2022). It has also been posited that the benefits of storytelling are experienced just as much by the listener as by the teller (Frank et al., 2015; Pallai & Tran, 2019). Additionally, such listening can also motivate those being exposed to the narrative to reflect on their personal lives (East et al., 2010; Frank, 1995; Thompson, 2022a; 2023b). Further research (Zak 2013, 2015; Barraza & Zak, 2009) has shown that people being exposed to narratives can increase their empathy, generosity, and social connectedness.

Research and practices have recently begun combining the concepts of narrative health with awe and other related resilience practices (Thompson, 2020; Thompson & Drew, 2020; Thompson, 2022a, 2022c, 2023a, 2023b; Thompson & Jensen, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research study that specifically used phenomenological methodology to guide the analysis and presentation of the data. This study was also guided by previous research studies (as cited in the previous section) that have examined awe, awe narratives, and secondary analysis of awe-related data. The secondary data analysis and theme

development were informed by phenomenological methodology and specifically interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Phenomenology is a qualitative methodology that involves examining how people experience a phenomenon (van Manen, 1990), while IPA emphasizes the role of the researcher in interpreting the data and developing themes (Frechette et al., 2020; Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith et al., 2009).

The purpose of this study was to gain access to participants' lifeworlds (Husserl, 1989) and their experience of phenomena in their everyday lives (Wheeler, 2011). Heidegger explained that this examination of the human account is not separate from the world, but instead amongst it and immersed in it (Brooks, 2015; Galanti Grollo, 2022; Wheeler, 2011). This phenomenological study is an examination of awe in relation to how participants live within the world, how they experience awe, and how they derive meaning from awe-related experiences (Brooks, 2015). This type of examination analyzes numerous participants' awe narratives while not losing focus on each individual's interpretation of the phenomenon being examined (awe). This process allows for themes to emerge when analyzing the whole, and it can only occur through interpreting individual accounts. This has been described as the hermeneutic circle, in which the researcher must interpret the statements made by individuals, make meaning of them, and finally, establish themes (Frechette et al., 2020).

Importantly, the themes are derived from the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon being studied as well as through analysis of the data. Although previous studies guided the framework for the data analysis and theme development, it is also important for the researcher to be open-minded, as the data can confirm or contrast with previous themes and new themes can also emerge.

This study's purpose was to examine awe through the participants' narratives and to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences of the phenomenon, awe. Accordingly, it explored the following questions: (a) how do participants define and explain awe? (b) what are their experiences of awe? (c) are there themes, and if so, are they consistent with previous research? and (d) do the shared awe narratives incorporate other resilience practices that can support their well-being?

Data

The dataset comprised 435 participants. IPA research suggests that the group being examined be homogenous (Smith et al., 2009). For this study, although participants came from diverse backgrounds and professions and resided in numerous countries, they are homogenous in that they took part in a resilience program called the Awe Project between 2021 and 2023 in 35 cohorts. The Awe Project is a 5-day resilience program that participants access through a private Google class page on their mobile devices, where, twice a day, they engage in the following practices: undertaking a 1-minute breathing practice, watching a short awe-related video, and answering two questions and sharing their answers with the group. The first question is related to the video and the second question is a broader resilience question (for more on the program, see Thompson, 2022a).

Participants were asked to complete a pre-program survey that included 11 questions. The secondary analysis examined the following three questions: (a) how would you define awe? (b) how would you describe what it is like to

experience awe? Be as descriptive as possible (not by giving an example but by explaining what it is like when experiencing awe), and (c) after taking a few minutes to think about a particular time, fairly recently, when you felt intense awe, describe a single experience of intense awe in about 2 full paragraphs. Participants were asked to focus as much as possible on the experience itself, rather than what led up to it, what happened afterwards, or their interpretation of the experience, and to be as descriptive and specific as possible. The development of the three questions was inspired by and adapted from previous narrative awe studies (Campos et al., 2013; Krenzer et al., 2020; Piff et al., 2015). Finally, participant responses to the pre-program prompt to share their definition of awe with other participants in the Google Classroom were also included in this analysis.

Analysis

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) has been described as not being a prescriptive methodology but a way of supporting studies by previous research, guidelines, and suggestions (Smith & Osborn, 2004; Thompson, 2023a). Therefore, the following methodology for analysis, which is also informed by previous studies, including secondary analysis of awe data, was created specifically for this study (Bonner & Friedman, 2011; Thompson, 2022a). Each of the awe definitions and narratives was read multiple times and then entered into a spreadsheet. They were coded for awe topics to assist with the interpretation of the data and theme development. Importantly, this was not done to identify potential statistical, quantitative significances, as this study is grounded in qualitative methodologies. This type of IPA, and generally phenomenology and qualitative research as a whole, is more concerned with finding significance in the quality of the data and not finding meaning by achieving a certain number of participants, so the sample size was comparatively small. As the data were reviewed, themes were informed by, but not restricted to, pre-existing awe themes, especially those involving narratives (Bonner & Friedman, 2011; Cuzzolino, 2021; Thompson & Jensen, 2023; Thompson 2022a, 2022c; Thompson 2023a, 2023b), as well as through interpretation of the current data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Consistent with previous IPA suggestions, as well as studies conducted on awe and resilience, the results and the discussion are provided together (Smith et al., 2009; Thompson, 2022a; Thompson & Jensen, 2023; Thompson, 2023a, 2023b). First, the participants' explanations of awe are examined. This is followed by demonstrating the complexity of awe by analyzing a specific narrative, and then examining the themes that emerged.

Awe Defined

Since awe has been defined as being a complex emotion, it was not surprising that participants frequently shared that it is not easy to explain:

I would have to say that in those [awe] moments, I have felt like such a tiny speck in this beautiful mystery of life. Like I just couldn't have imagined the beauty, sounds,

or the smells ... the extreme joy or satisfaction. How amazing was the thrill. My heartbeat racing. How if felt against my skin. Awe is an amazing thing ... sometimes words just doesn't do it justice.

An indescribable feeling.

Your body metaphorically freezes; your mind is in slow motion yet so many things are racing through it filling your brain with emotions you can't explain.

The following participant elaborated that awe's complexity is not limited to being unable to articulate it into words or emotions; it also creates this inability cognitively: "A feeling of wonder, by witnessing beauty that defies understanding."

Not all the participants were hindered in their attempts to define awe. Some were able to offer precise, detailed, and poignant definitions. Table II provides participants' examples of how awe can be positive, ambiguous, humbling, captivating, extraordinary, self-transcending, and challenge individuals' thinking, among many more, as reflected in the previously provided definition and attributes of awe.

As awe increasingly becomes a topic of research, it is understandable that there will be various definitions. Importantly, given the historical understanding of awe and how it has been described, and changed, over time (Allen, 2019), it should be expected (and embraced) that (a) awe does not require a singular definition and (b) the definition should adapt as it is further experienced and studied.

The Complexity of Awe Narratives

Awe narratives can include numerous, intense emotions and challenge a person's current thinking. The elements of this complexity were shared by many when defining awe, including the following explanation:

TABLE II Definitions of Awe

Awe is grandeur that exists outside [of] or (and) beyond oneself.
Awe is something that causes you to pause and recognize that which is greater than oneself. Something that creates a sense of peace in an otherwise turbulent world. Awe is that which makes what may be causing you strife seem much more insignificant. Awe for me is a pure perspective adjuster.
Awe can be defined as a strong feeling of amazement, admiration, or reverence for something or someone.
For me, to experience awe is to acutely (and simultaneously) be aware of how small and large you are in the whole scheme of life; it's both humbling and astounding. Most often, it gives the feeling that you are something small in a vast, undefinable, intricately designed thing—and that's okay.
A moment that makes you stop thinking of anything other than admiring something. It invokes immediate mindfulness.
A trigger that brings me outside of myself and the daily tasks and routines; forces humility; creates a sense of wonderment and optimism.
My definition of awe is an event or experience (almost always positive) that was unexpected (or unexpected in its magnitude) evoking a lot of feelings that—at the time—can be overwhelming, but you know at that moment that you will remember this event or experience for a very long time, if not forever.

It's like being ravished by emotion. Seeing and experiencing something that extends beyond what words can adequately describe. Sometimes, it forces a sense of cognitive dissonance where my mind is telling me that everything is dark and gloomy and then there is this absolutely incredible thing or experience right there in my life and I never want it to end. Awe takes me back to my childlike state where curiosity and wonder are second nature. It's beautiful.

The following narrative demonstrates how a nature-based awe experience involves numerous other awe attributes too, including a spiritual component:

As I was driving through Pennsylvania, the mountains that surrounded me were mammoth. As I looked out the window, I noticed how green the leaves on the trees were. So green, vibrant and beautiful. I thought about what was out there. All of the unexplored territory. I was at peace. We climbed one side of the mountain and down the other. I felt much more spiritual and even thought what heaven might be like.

My mind wandered and I wanted to soak in the sight. I wanted to burn it into my memory so I could recall it at a later date. I am not sure why I found it so breathtakingly beautiful, but I just couldn't imagine how the mountain was formed, which led to more questions about the infrastructure and the road crews who worked long hard hours to build a road.

My mind then switched to my career and I questioned if I would ever be able to work a construction job. I remember thinking how hard that must be.

The preceding story demonstrates the complexity of an awe narrative. In Hartog et al.'s (2017) theoretical model of narrative meaning making, reflecting and sharing narratives like the one above can, for the person sharing it, create new meaning in that person's life, especially when it raises existential questions. In this case, that included contemplating heaven, how the mountains were made, and the person's own personal abilities. The complexity of awe is further demonstrated in this narrative, as one type of awe elicitor can be a gateway to numerous other awe elicitors and to other positive emotions, and it can overlap with other resilience practices.

Using a narratology approach, this awe experience is examined through its structure: how the story is created, how it is perceived, and how it influences (Martine, 2019). In this particular narrative, and as illustrated in Figure 1, the story's awe elicitor is being in nature, while there is much more occurring. First, the individual experiences a sense of smallness (humility) that leads to feeling immersed in the moment (mindfulness). Next, a spiritual affiliation is evoked, opening the way to a sense of uncertainty. This uncertainty results in a curiosity about the nature of and human contributions to the narrator's awe experience. Finally, the curiosity prompts self-reflection.

It is important to note that this narrative, while demonstrating the complexity of how a single awe story can include numerous awe attributes, includes a concluding self-reflection. Based on the seminal work of Keltner and Haidt (2003), there

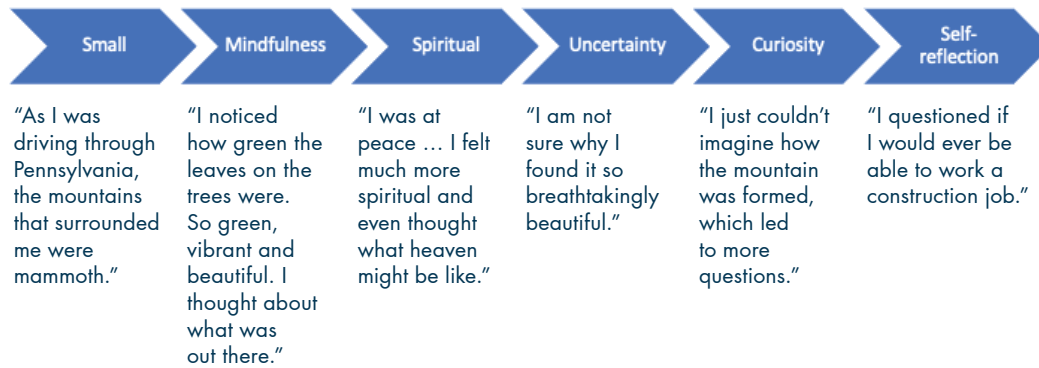


FIGURE 1 The Complexity of Awe

are two critical components of awe: a sense of vastness, which then leads to a term described as an NFA. This refers to individuals experiencing awe needing to reshape their current understanding of the world. The data in this study suggest that it is not just a reshaping of one's understanding of the outside world, but of oneself too. Further, based on the above narrative, it is possible that NFA does not occur in every instance of experiencing awe. Instead, in the above narrative, the individual engages in a self-reflection practice to try to gain an understanding and meaning of the vast awe experience. This is further discussed in the section on uncertainty and ambiguity.

Narrative Themes for Awe

Phenomenological research, including IPA, is concerned with individuals' experiences of a phenomenon, while the data are analyzed and interpreted collectively so that themes emerge. Through these themes, a greater understanding of participants' experiences can arise.

Tables III and IV identify the themes that emerged from the participants' definitions and stories. In total, 33 themes and 22 sub-themes emerged. The number of themes that emerged is notable yet not surprising. Phenomenology, and specifically IPA, guided the analysis, and considering they are not prescriptive methodologies (Miller & Minton, 2016; Smith & Nizza, 2021; Smith & Osborn, 2003), the analysis was not limited to a predetermined or fixed number of themes. Further, the analysis of this study's data and resulting themes are comprehensive, but they should not come across as unexpected, as they are consistent with themes that have emerged from previous awe and resilience research (Bonner & Friedman, 2011; Cuzzolino, 2021; Thompson & Jensen, 2023; Thompson 2022a, 2022c, 2023a, 2023b). What this study has done is uniquely brought many of them together, and each is supported with an excerpt as shown in both tables.

Table III expands on the broader categories of Table I and the definitions of awe from Table II. In an attempt to explain a complex emotion such as awe, the researcher constructed the table with two columns. The first column identifies the categorical themes, which expands on the list originally detailed in Table I. Importantly, the data analysis identified additional categories beyond what previous research has established. To support the categories, the second column offers an example from the participants.

Formatted similarly to Table III, Table IV identifies the effect awe had on the participants while it also highlights that awe can serve as a gateway to other resilience practices (Thompson & Jensen, 2023).

Collectively, Table III and Table IV are the result of what phenomenology, especially IPA, is designed to do: examine a phenomenon through the people directly experiencing it (Column 2) and then interpret it (the themes in Column 1). In IPA, this has been described as a double hermeneutic, where the "researcher is trying to make sense of the participant[s] trying to make sense of what is happening to them" (Nizza et al., 2021, p. 23). Importantly, the second column demonstrates how the themes emerged directly from the participants' statements, as phenomenology is concerned with how individuals experience the phenomenon. Previous phenomenological researchers suggest using extensive raw data (participant excerpts and quotations) to support the development of themes (Miller & Minton, 2016; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

The two tables demonstrate the complexity of both the themes and the narrative excerpts. While some research attempts to isolate certain elements or elicitors of awe, in reality, it is often, yet again, complex, as multiple themes are contained in one experience of awe. For example, the theme *alone* listed in Table III and its corresponding example also involves other themes such as nature, gratitude, water, and mindfulness. This supports this study's emphasis on the value of using qualitative, and specifically phenomenological, methodologies to examine awe. This is not to diminish quantitative research—both are needed—yet this example demonstrates that awe is more than statistical analysis of how frequently a certain theme is experienced when trying to determine awe's significance and impact on people. The significance of awe is first the experience of the individual, and it then moves beyond the individual, and because of the thick data qualitative research is able to collect, the researcher's analysis and interpretations reveal the themes.

Experiences of awe, as disclosed in the narratives and definitions, can be both something that surprises someone in an unexpected manner, which are often in once-in-a-lifetime-moments, while conversely it also can occur in everyday moments including when an intentional perspective is taken. This yet again illuminates the complexity of awe, and it is through the narratives that we are further able to understand and interpret these serendipitous awe moments, as well as

TABLE III Narrative themes for awe: Awe categories

Theme (Listed Alphabetically)	Example
Accomplishments	
Birth	
Being Present	Being in the delivery room and witnessing the birth of my son was a beautiful and incredible experience for me.
Giving Birth	When I had my ... I remember immediately crying and taking a deep breath. I was overwhelmed with gratitude.
Exercise	My wife and I run very early in the mornings and at times we are running as the sun comes up.... I had a feeling of being blessed. I am healthy enough to be able to be out seeing and having this experience.
Flying	I sat quietly on the plane, looking out over the Rockies as we approached the destination and just breathed it all in ... literally and figuratively... It was a really cool moment, one that I'll never forget.
Man-made	I felt small and insignificant next to the bridge, and I felt pride at the fact I live so close to such an amazing and iconic structure that stands proud and strong despite the relentless rail traffic crossing it every hour.
Others (close)	My middle child is autistic, I have watched him work hard and overcome so much. When he graduated high school with honors in the middle of a pandemic, I was in awe of him.
Others (strangers)	Watching a documentary on WW2 with vets from Normandy. I felt inspired, humble, and honored to hear their stories, and their sacrifices made me want to be a better person. I also felt proud that such bravery and selflessness existed in humans.
Self	Watching my son run down the boardwalk in the rain.... I was so proud to be his dad and [it] almost brought me to tears.
Travel	It was like an up-close experience of something I normally wouldn't be able to see coming from [location] and because of that, I was lost for words.
Technology	Flying above the clouds in a metal machine that many just accept as part of life has never ceased to amaze me. Here I was thousands of feet above the earth, closest to the stars I'll ever be, at the mercy of this machine.
Alone	I was sitting on the beach alone. There were other people there, but I was blissfully by myself.... Being alone ... is an immersive experience.
Connectedness	I felt suddenly a great relief as I realized I am a part of a much bigger world.
Personal Relationships	The intense feeling of that deep family love connection made everything around us fall away, all I could feel, see, smell was my family. It felt like the three of us were in a bubble and nothing could touch us.
Pets	It was something so simple. I was away from home for a few days and my dog was so happy to see me when I got home.
Nature	I felt very much at one with the rain, the green, the river, and with myself.
Music (and the Arts)	Classical music orchestra concert.... I'm close enough that it is like I actually feel the music touching me. It's just incredible that they can all separately create this beautiful piece of music.
Nature	I thought of how vast the world is and [was] fascinated by nature.
Beach	Taking a ride down to the beach, listening to the waves crash under the sky full of stars and the moon shimmering down. It's the calmness the ocean brings.
Mountains	I thought about how vast the land of the mountains is and how powerful and big it looked.
Sounds	I realized I was listening to the birds singing. I stopped and closed my eyes and took a deep breath.... I felt such a sense of appreciation for these little birds singing. Their singing made me feel joy, a new fresh start, and appreciation to be able to walk and listen, live in the moment.
Sunrise/Sunset	The sunsets have been absolutely beautiful lately, and the other day I was driving home. The sky was cotton candy pink and blue, and it looked so beautiful.... It was exactly what I needed—I felt relaxed, at ease, and calm.
Trees	Especially being surrounded by green and trees and the music of nature.
Water	I dove down into the warm waters; I could never have imagined the beauty that was awaiting me.
Ordinary Moments	I was able to enjoy the beautiful landscape, and although I see it every day, it never seems to get old.
Rare Moments	I knew this was "once in a lifetime."
Space	I felt that the universe was utterly immense and that I was a part of it all.
Spiritual	I felt like I was connected to a higher power.

TABLE IV Narrative themes for awe: The impact of experiencing awe and serving as a gateway to other resilience practices

Theme (Listed Alphabetically)	Example
Beauty	It was nature at its peak, and it felt beautiful.
Cognitive reappraisal Negative experiences	I felt suddenly a great relief as I realized ... that my once big problems were now minimal. We lost [died] a family member.... The younger cousins are all under 7 years old and they didn't understand at times why we would be laughing and then crying, so at one point one of them came over to me and just gave me a big hug and kiss on the cheek, and that made me feel pure happiness. This 7-year-old didn't know what pain and loss were, but he knew how to console and make someone feel loved. That brought awe to the whole room.
Connectedness	I felt suddenly a great relief as I realized I am a part of a much bigger world.
Curiosity	My mind tries to comprehend or understand how such a thing could exist, or appreciate how much work went into it. It sometimes seems magical, like this could not have been created by human hands.
Empathy	I was watching a video of a female African American country singer who was snubbed by country radio stations that did not want to play her song. First, I was struck on how beautiful her voice was. Then I heard the lyrics. They describe[d] how it felt for her to be African American and the challenges she faced. I felt a connection to her message.
Emotional intelligence	I felt a rush of emotion and just sat with it.
Gratitude	The whole time I was just trying to absorb it all, remember it, appreciate it; grateful for the life I have, grateful to experience everything.
Humility	Looking up at all the stars, thinking about how long they've been in existence and marveling about how we can see them even though they're so far away is truly humbling.
Intensity	I literally could not think of anything else because my heart was overwhelmed with all the beautiful nature I was seeing.
Learning/Filling knowledge gaps	I experienced intense awe while I was on a ferry. My sense of wonder on how a boat can carry such weight; when I go in the water I will sink. This feeling made me thirsty to understand the science behind the concept.
Meaning and purpose in life	A calmness; clarity; stillness. In a good way, I feel small. Almost as if the universe is reminding me there is a bigger picture here. And how I contribute to it matters. Even if that means stopping and breathing. Taking inventory of what matters.
Mindfulness	I felt like we (the people in the room with me) were the only people in the world; everything and everyone else stopped and did not matter.
Open-mindedness	I have the opportunity to see things from different perspectives.
Physicality	I also felt a surge of energy, and at times I ran as fast as I could down the trail. I guess I almost felt stronger physically by the experience as well.
Profoundness	I'm flooded with awareness of the world around me, usually how great or beautiful or complex it is, and my place in it. It feels exciting and humbling. I feel like my awareness is only scratching the surface of what's out there.
Prospection (hope and optimism)	Gives me hope for the future and also perspective about things.
Self-care	I ... managed to understand how important it was for me and how incredible it felt to do something for myself.
Self-efficacy	The experience was breathtaking. I felt so inspired and like all my problems had taken a back seat and I could do anything. I also felt so happy, a feeling similar to love. I felt confident, strong.
Self-transcendent experience	I felt joyful and happy and I felt like I wanted to spread that joy to everyone around me.
Smallness	I felt like I was a part of nature and still reminded how small I am yet how my decisions could affect life.
Speechlessness	I couldn't possibly obtain the words to properly describe the experience; maybe that was better.
Toleration for uncertainty and ambiguity	I just couldn't imagine how the mountain was formed, which led to more questions.
Transformation	For the last 12 years or so, I've felt numb to emotion and very few things make me feel fully alive, but this moment in time, moment in space, I felt one with the universe and I had no words, just teary eyes from not wanting it to end.
Vastness	Something that gives us perspective, something that allows us to grasp for a moment the vastness and beauty of the world we live in and our place in it.

those occurring in people’s everyday lives (Martine, 2019). The next two sections explore this further, and they are followed by a greater examination of some of the themes from Table IV.

Uncertainty and Ambiguity

As previously explained, and as based on the seminal work of Keltner and Haidt (2003), two elements are often incorporated into describing awe experiences: a sense of vastness and an NFA. One participant elaborated: “When at first something didn’t make sense but after looking at it with a different perspective you see it with more clarity.”

Yet based on the analysis of the definitions and stories shared, in some instances the NFA did not exist, while there was an acknowledgement of not fully comprehending what was occurring. This has also been referred to as identifying knowledge gaps (Chirico & Yaden, 2018; McPhetres, 2019). The following examples display this acknowledgement while also revealing uncertainty:

A feeling of wonder, by witnessing beauty that defies understanding.

Like you are aware of the fact that you are something small in a vast, unknowable (yet beautiful, intricately designed) thing.

Awe moments were described as being magical and unexplainable, and for some participants, NFA was not expressed. In addition to awe revealing gaps in knowledge along with uncertainty, it has also been associated with ambiguity. Many of the participants expressed this sense of ambiguity:

An experience of awe is to acutely (and simultaneously) be aware of how small and large you are in the whole scheme of life; it’s both humbling and astounding.

I feel insignificant and significant at the same time.

It is a sense of calmness and euphoria.

Importantly, these comments demonstrate that experiencing awe involves feeling ambiguity and uncertainty in the moment, while it may also have a lasting effect to support the participants in other moments in their lives when experiencing both uncertainty and ambiguity.

Extraordinary and Ordinary Moments of Awe

Awe researchers Marianna Graziosi and David Yaden (2019) explained that awe moments can be ordinary responses to something (or someone) extraordinary or extraordinary responses to something ordinary. Table V elaborates on this concept by providing definitions and narratives shared by participants.

TABLE V Extraordinary and ordinary awe

Definition	
Awe is a sense of wonder and amazement. It can be a response to something ordinary or extraordinary.	
Definitions	
Extraordinary	Ordinary
Being in awe to me is being in complete amazement or disbelief of something that has occurred.	To me, experiencing awe is an intentional act, otherwise the moment or experience passes you by.
Viewing something amazing that stops me in my tracks. Something that is sublime and beautiful.	My favorite saying is “enjoy the little things in life for someday you will realize they were the big things.” Awe moments are often those little things.
Awe is being amazed by something either so small or large that is so memorizing. A real WOW moment.	A spontaneous moment in which one acknowledges and appreciates the beauty of [one’s] surroundings, and/or the people within them.
Examples	
The most intense awe I have felt somewhat recently is watching my nephew being born. I was there for the entire labor process and it pained me to see my sister in pain but the moment of birth was priceless. It brought me to tears and left me speechless. It really is like watching a miracle. I felt a burst of emotions all at once.	It was something so simple. I was away from home for a few days and my dog was so happy to see me when I got home. I couldn’t put down the items in my hands quick enough. My dog just ran me over and began to dance all over me and lick my face.
Appreciation and respect for my sister, my mother, and life itself. When I was asked to cut the umbilical cord, I wanted to savor the moment and make sure I never forgot it. I have an appreciation for life and mothers already, but this moment increased it tenfold.	It was such a feeling of acceptance and joy. I didn’t want the moment to stop because I was so happy in it. It put a smile on my face and just picked my mood up. That mood carried over even after the incident stopped.
Climbing down Pikes Peak, Colorado, it felt like there was something amazing around every turn. Everything from the view from that high, to the foliage, the quiet, the drop-offs from the side of the mountain was intense. Kind of like suddenly my eyes were open and I was seeing everything more acutely or vividly.	Saturday morning, while getting ready for work I noticed a very thick fog [so] you couldn’t see the mountains, but the fog was beautiful. It put me thinking about my day and although I’m not a fan of heading in on a Saturday I was able to enjoy the beautiful landscape and although I see it every day it never seems to get old.
	Daily experiences of awe are all around and I get to experience it. And I am grateful for that.

The examples in Table V show how both ordinary and extraordinary situations can create awe moments. Often, extraordinary awe moments can be surprising and catch people off-guard. However, every day, ordinary awe experiences can require intentional and purposeful perspective-taking. Contrastingly, Kirk Schneider (2009), an awe researcher, cautions awe-seekers to avoid seeking out awe moments and, instead, be open to the opportunity of experiencing them. The definitions provided for the extraordinary and ordinary awe moments capture these two approaches.

Many awe narratives are linked with other resilience practices. The following story demonstrates how a purposeful approach to an ordinary moment can involve awe and resilience practices such as cognitive reappraisal and gratitude:

The last experience would be dinner with my wife. I took her to a Korean BBQ place. I felt happy that I got to take her on a new experience, even though we were told it was going to be a long wait and they were training a new server. In that moment, we didn't worry about the stresses. We were just together, having fun, and everything we had been going through together wasn't there or the focus.

We were enjoying each other, and that entire time was just an awe experience. I just felt a lot of happiness and remembering how all the things that have happened really wasn't something we needed to carry every day. I was able to relax and be present, all of me.

This awe narrative demonstrates that, in addition to cognitive reappraisal and gratitude, other relationships to resilience practices also exist. The following section elaborates on this.

Awe and Real Resilience

Practices in resilience are not necessarily designed to make life's stressors vanish, as often they occur beyond individuals' control; therefore, proactive preparation is a more realistic approach, having strategies to manage stressors and adverse events, and techniques to support recovery. As previously discussed, Hanson's terminology on acceptance and agency presents a real (or practical) approach to resilience. Many participants demonstrated this perspective by realizing how taking the time to experience and reflect on awe can help them in handling their daily stressors:

A sense of amazement and overwhelming wonder that transports you from the everyday.

Even though rough things happen daily, we need to see the beauty in every day. Find the positive ... try to see beauty in everything and everyone.

Something that creates a sense of peace in an otherwise turbulent world.

The above excerpts, along with those previously shared that demonstrate that awe elicits experiences of uncertainty and ambiguity, offer insight into how awe can provide individuals with momentary positive experiences that give them important breaks from daily stressors as well as potentially supporting them in handling stressors as they arise. The following participant further connected this with well-being:

Awe can act as a "boost" to the spirit. Just as a car can be brought back to life with jumper cables, a moment of awe leaves one feeling energized, uplifted, and restored. I suspect that awe has a healing effect—potentially alleviating the impact of cumulative stress that manifests as fatigue, isolation, and diminished hopefulness.

The above statement supports previous research that suggests that in addition to supporting individuals' overall well-being, awe can potentially help counter risk factors for mental health conditions and support suicide prevention efforts (Chirico & Gaggioli, 2021; Thompson 2023b).

CONCLUSION

Reflection, storytelling, and sharing narratives can aid the development of personal resilience, and they can also provide opportunities for others when they are exposed to these narratives. The experience of awe can be different for each person. This study has examined personal awe experiences, and through these examinations, themes have emerged both confirming those that pre-exist as well as new ones, providing a deeper understanding of this complex emotion and the role it can have in supporting personal resilience. As demonstrated in the analysis, awe moments can be described as being extraordinary or ordinary, transformational, and supportive of one's well-being. Through these awe definitions and experiences, the narratives and themes can provide a foundation for future studies, including measuring the impact awe has on both the person sharing the narratives and those who have access to these stories.

The intentional design of this paper was motivated by the need to improve people's well-being. Often referred to as translational research, this work was intended to "to advance discoveries, knowledge, and innovation to improve human health" (Thompson et al., 2022, p. 616). This paper, especially the tables, was designed to be accessible and meaningful to researchers conducting future studies, but also, importantly, to others beyond academia, including those who design and teach resilience, mental health, and well-being courses, as well as to individuals. For this second group, the awe themes have been provided in a straightforward manner in the tables, importantly including narrative examples that can be used by, and potentially inspire, others.

The limitations of this study are that it is just one qualitative approach among many, which needs to continue, along with quantitative research, to examine the potential impact awe can have on supporting the mental health and resilience of both the person experiencing it and to the person hearing it. Considering the immersive role of the researcher in phenomenological research, the author can validate the personal, positive impact the study had and can further support the promising role of awe in narrative health to support the well-being of individuals and groups.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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