

Awe in Action:

How Designing for
Awe Can Deepen
Impact at Gatherings

A report by Awe Exchange
and the House of Beautiful Business

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Awe Exchange is a nonprofit laboratory dedicated to advancing awe-based changemaking.

In partnership with the *House of Beautiful Business*—a global platform reimagining business and societal futures—we explored the role of awe in transformative gatherings.

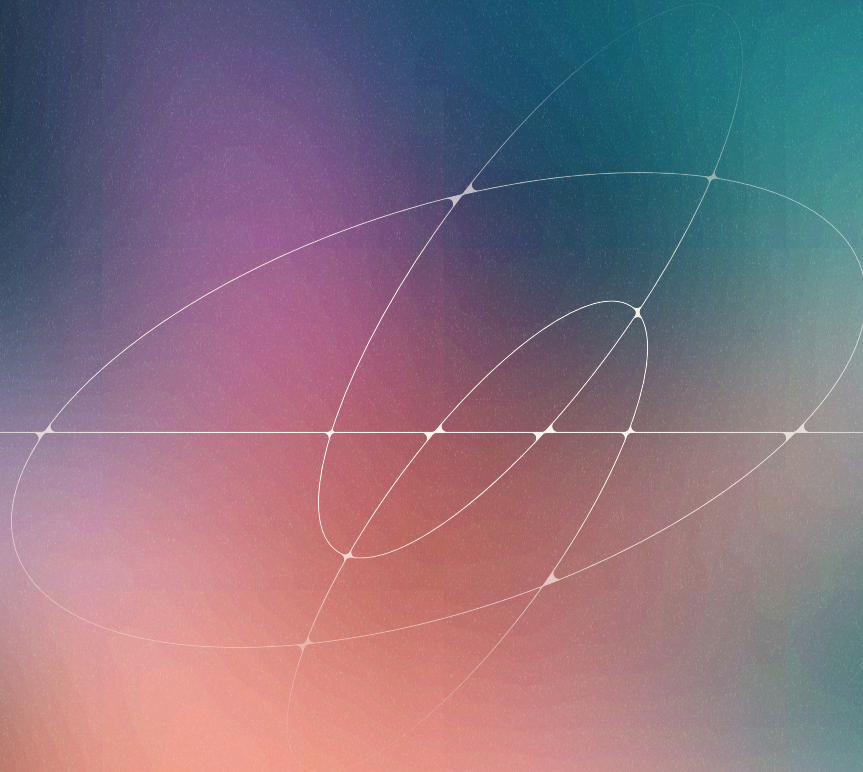
This exploration's focal point is *Between the Two of Us*, a four-day House of Beautiful Business gathering held in Tangier, Morocco, in May 2024. The event brought together 600 participants to explore dualities shaping the modern world, such as growth and degrowth, human agency and artificial intelligence, and extraction and regeneration.

We conducted interviews with a focus group of more than a dozen participants at three key stages.

85% of participants were new to the House of Beautiful Business community, while 15% had attended at least one gathering before. These conversations, along with broader research, revealed key insights about the potential of awe, the conditions for its emergence, and the scaffolding required to turn it into lasting transformation at gatherings like these.



Adapting the awe experience scale



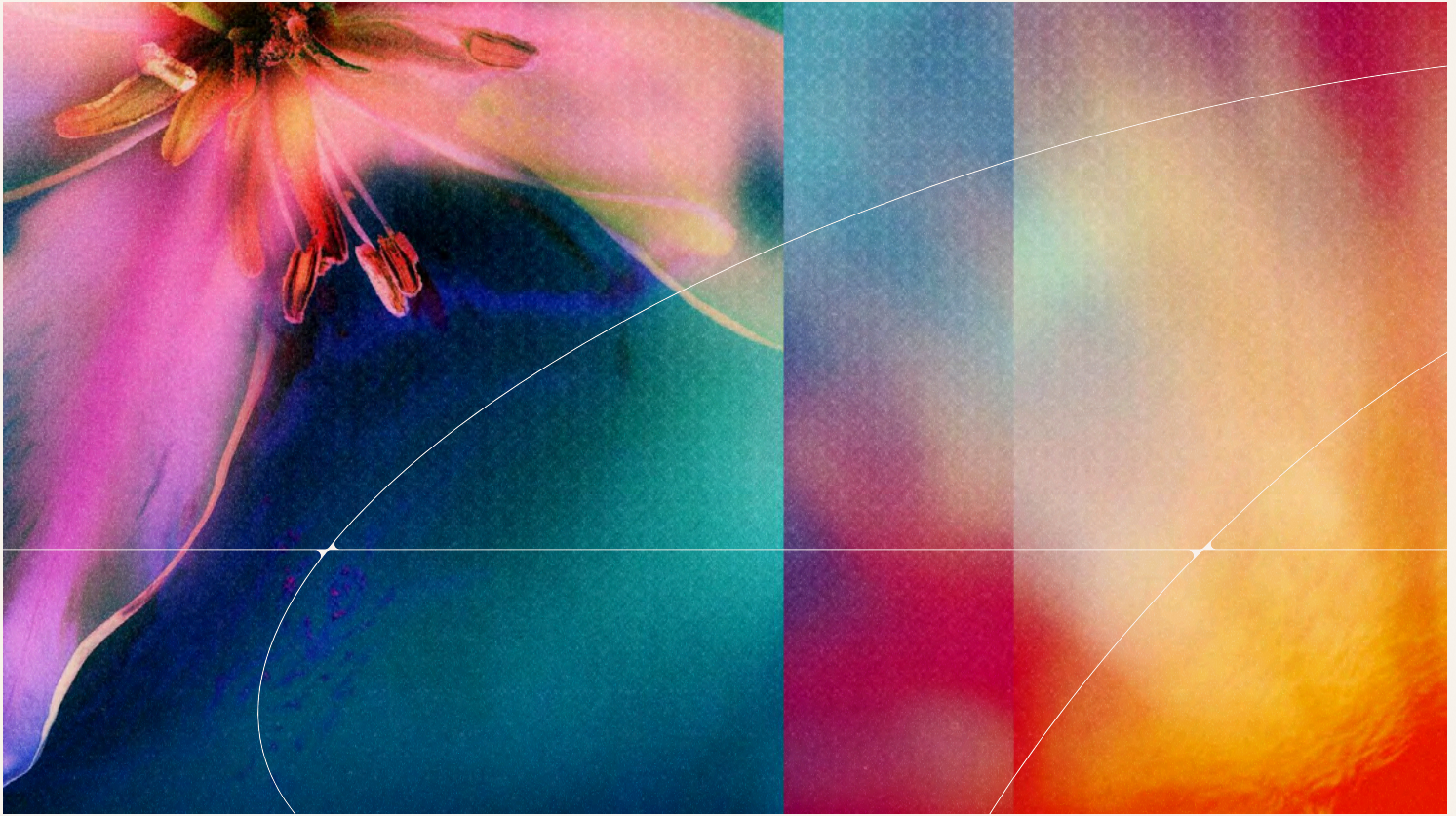
To better understand the role of awe in the context of impact-focused gatherings, we drew inspiration from the Awe Experience Scale (AWE-S), developed by Dr. Scott Barry Kaufman and Dr. David Yaden. This multifactorial measure explores six key dimensions of awe: altered time perception, self-diminishment, connectedness, perceived vastness, physical sensations, and the need for accommodation.

Recognizing the unique environment of the House of Beautiful Business, we adapted the AWE-S into a tailored framework for our focus group. This adaptation retained the core dimensions of the original scale while allowing for a narrative-driven, context-sensitive exploration of participants' experiences.

It is important to note that this insights guide is not a scientific report. Our findings are rooted in anecdotal evidence and narrative reflections shared by participants rather than a rigorous, quantitative methodology. The adapted scale served as a guiding tool to structure and deepen the qualitative insights gathered from the group, helping us explore how awe manifests in socially driven gatherings and how it can inspire connection, reflection, and transformative action.

This multifactorial measure explores six key dimensions of awe: **altered time perception, self-diminishment, connectedness, perceived vastness, physical sensations, and the need for accommodation.**

Why awe matters



The science of awe

Awe is a profound emotion that arises when we encounter something vast, often triggering a recalibration of our understanding of the world. Research shows that awe can:

01. Foster prosocial behavior: Awe shifts focus from the individual to the collective, increasing empathy and social connection.
02. Promote resilience: Awe has been shown to help individuals cope with adversity by reframing challenges in a broader perspective.
03. Enhance creativity and curiosity: Awe opens the mind, encouraging exploration and innovation.

Why now?

Awe has become increasingly relevant in our polarized and fragmented world. The deepening divides in politics, identity, and ideology demand a remembering of the tools we have always had access to, to foster connection, mutual understanding, and collective action. As environmental and societal crises intersect, gatherings designed to cultivate awe offer a powerful opportunity to address this disconnection from ourselves, each other, and the planet.

Why awe matters

Awe and depolarization

Research by Schneider, Jiao, and Stellar suggests that experiences of awe can have positive impacts on social interactions and cooperation. These studies found that individuals who experienced awe were more likely to engage in empathetic and cooperative behaviors, even with people who held opposing political views. Awe accomplishes this by fostering a “small self,” a diminished sense of individual importance, which in turn promotes a greater sense of connection to others.

Self-transcendent emotions include compassion, gratitude, and awe. Compassion supports caring for others, gratitude builds commitment by responding to the kindness of others, and awe helps individuals feel part of the collective by reducing the feeling of individual importance.

One participant reflected about their experience at the gathering; “It gave me a very different perspective when I heard the same idea or topic from people who are very, very far from my day-to-day. It made me think, ‘Why don’t I enlarge my pool of inspiration?’”

Awe’s ability to reduce self-focus makes it uniquely suited to depolarizing conversations. By shifting individuals out of rigid identities and into a shared sense of wonder, awe creates fertile ground for dialogue and understanding.



Collective action

Awe has a unique ability to inspire collective action, making it a powerful tool in addressing global challenges. According to Dr. Kirk Schneider, awe motivates behaviors that prioritize group goals over individual interests, fostering collaboration and reducing conflict.

This was reflected in the *Between the Two of Us* gathering. One participant noted, “I felt this sense of possibility and reconnection to humanity, like we are meant to live together and overcome these divides. It gave me hope in humanity again.”

Awe shifts focus outward, encouraging participants to think beyond their immediate concerns and engage with larger systems and communities. This outward focus is critical for tackling issues that require collective action.

The decline of shared spiritual experiences

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Why awe matters

The need for space to process the duality

The space and ability to metabolize awe is often lost in the over-programming of gatherings and events, especially when both awesome and awful emotions rise to the surface. Programs tend to emphasize intellectual stimulation and celebratory narratives, leaving little room for participants to sit with their emotions or explore the complexity of their experiences. However, awe is not inherently “good” or “bad”; it is destabilizing and transformative, requiring time and space to be fully understood and integrated.

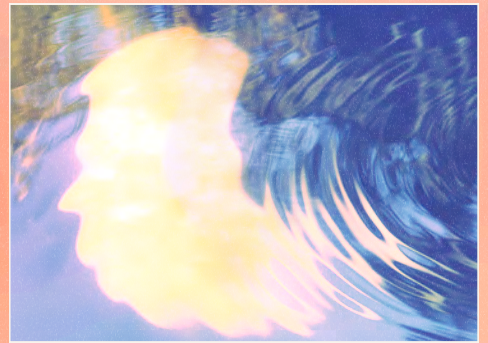
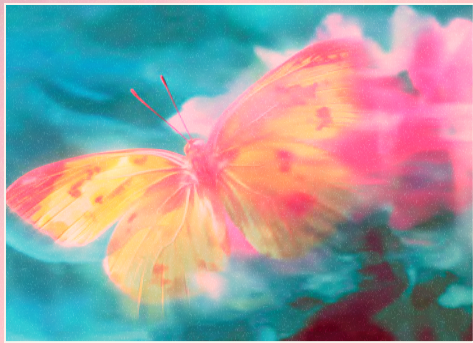
As one participant reflected, “We didn’t and still haven’t had time to synthesize. But I’ll say, in a nutshell, my main thing right now is just this realization that the awe bit is misunderstood... (...) when we talked about awe, we were there to kind of spread this toxic positivity around.”

This participant’s observation underscores how the emphasis on awe has focused on positive experiences, especially during gatherings and events. There is a general tendency to flatten complex emotions into more simplistic narratives of optimism when large groups of diverse people gather. When gatherings aim to inspire, this focus on constant celebration or intellectualization of emotions can feel out of sync with the inner landscape of emotions participants bring into these gatherings. With the reality of global challenges we face, participants may feel disoriented within the event programming—caught between the awesome and the awful, with little guidance on how to hold both together.

Though emotions like awe have the quality of sparking collective action, instead of striving for these outcomes, gatherings prioritizing inner shifts—moments of reflection that reshape how participants see themselves and their place in the world, coupled with the shepherding of the complexity of those emotions—is what eventually paves the way forward towards action. These shifts of perception are not about quick resolutions but about creating fertile ground for longer-term transformation. The destabilizing nature of awe—its capacity to challenge assumptions and open up new possibilities—is its greatest strength, but only if we allow time to process it.

To truly harness awe, we must design gatherings that acknowledge its duality. Awe is not a simple good or bad; it is a liminal space that holds tension and complexity. By creating room for participants to metabolize awe—to reflect, feel, and reconcile its destabilizing effects—we can foster the kinds of inner shifts that eventually lead to meaningful action.

Findings



Diving into the pathways to awe

Pathways to awe

Dr. Dacher Keltner, one of the world's foremost emotion scientists, identifies eight primary ways humans experience awe: nature, music, art, collective effervescence, moral beauty, epiphanies, spirituality, and the sublime. These pathways serve as powerful design tools for gatherings, offering a diverse range of entry points for awe. However, they must be approached flexibly, recognizing that each person's response to awe is deeply personal and shaped by their unique experiences.

In our conversations, we explored moments that transcended the ordinary at *Between the Two of Us*—those that made time stand still, brought goosebumps, evoked tears, or left people speechless. From these personal stories, four main pathways to awe emerged. They are the following:

Moral beauty

The quality we find in virtuous actions and noble character—how an act of genuine kindness or selflessness can move us deeply. It appears when someone's inner goodness shines through their actions in a way that others find deeply affecting and beautiful.

Nature

Being in proximity to natural beauty, a wide open sky, the ocean, sunsets and orange trees. Nature offers us moments of pause and opportunities for awe and wonder to emerge.

Collective effervescence

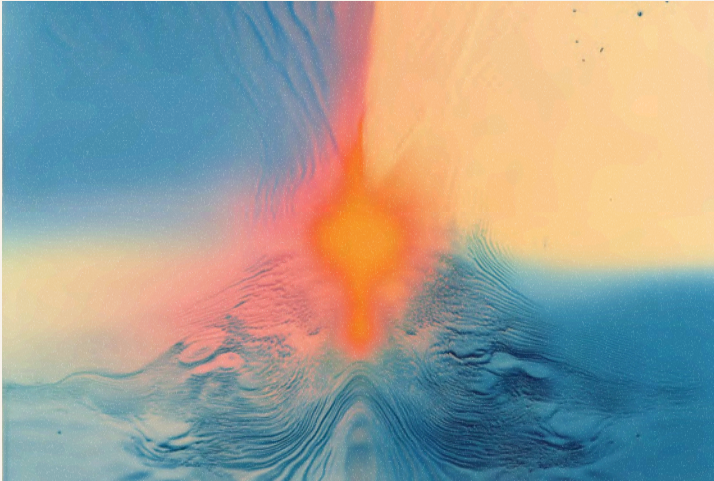
The social phenomenon where a group of people together experience heightened energy, unity, and shared emotion. The term was coined by sociologist Émile Durkheim, who observed how shared experiences can create a contagious feeling of connection and transcendence.

Art and music

Music and art have the unique ability to evoke moments of awe, bridging the gap between the seen and the felt. Through their universal languages, they communicate complex emotions and uncover patterns that words alone cannot express.

Shared connection and moral beauty

Awe predominantly emerged in moments of profound emotional connection with others.



The power of one-on-one

Many participants described their one-on-one conversations as pivotal to their overall experience of awe. One participant captured this sentiment, sharing, “And as we were having that conversation, we just sat under this tree... and it was an insane moment of connection, where we just felt like we knew each other forever, even though, like, you know, we only met.” These moments of profound resonance with another person, coupled with the backdrop of a natural space provided participants with a sense of timelessness and deep connection that lingered beyond the event itself.

“I think it’s like the first thing that comes to my mind when it comes to that feeling of [awe] are the connections and one-on-one conversations that I had with people.” The capacity of one-on-one conversations to cut through the noise of larger group dynamics offered an avenue for genuine emotional exchange.

These deeply personal exchanges were often cited as the moments where participants felt most connected to themselves, others, and the themes of the event. This finding underscores the importance of creating intentional spaces for one-on-one dialogue in event programming, as they can foster some of the most meaningful experiences of awe.

Witnessing connection

“Seeing [people] truly connect, overcoming their own backgrounds, their own education... that really touched my heart and gave me hope. It reassured this deep, deep belief that I have in me that gives me hope in humanity, and seeing that happening live in front of me...”

One participant expressed how observing others experience profound moments together, without taking part in them, reaffirmed deeply held beliefs about humanity’s capacity for understanding and connection. These moments also acted as emotional anchors, reminding participants of shared values and universal truths.

Witnessing vulnerability and courage

Dialogues between diverse voices stood out as moments of profound connection. One participant remarked, “It felt like I was seeing humanity at its best—listening, understanding, and connecting” when Israeli, Palestinian, and Iranian speakers shared the stage with their perspectives. These sessions embodied the moral beauty pathway to awe, as participants felt moved by the courage and vulnerability of others.

Other participants remarked people around them visibly emotional in disagreement or discord with what was shared during the same session. Witnessing this vulnerability (tears, anger, distress) marked certain participants in our focus group. The polarizing emotions of support and hurt left a strong impression of tension in the air for them. The participants who witnessed others’ distress during this segment recall it closer to ‘awful,’ mainly because of the polarization of emotion in the space, followed up with a swift transition in programming leaving no room to address it, to comfort others or bridge build. Witnessing this level of vulnerability at the gathering was identified by participants as an ‘awe-filled’ moment.

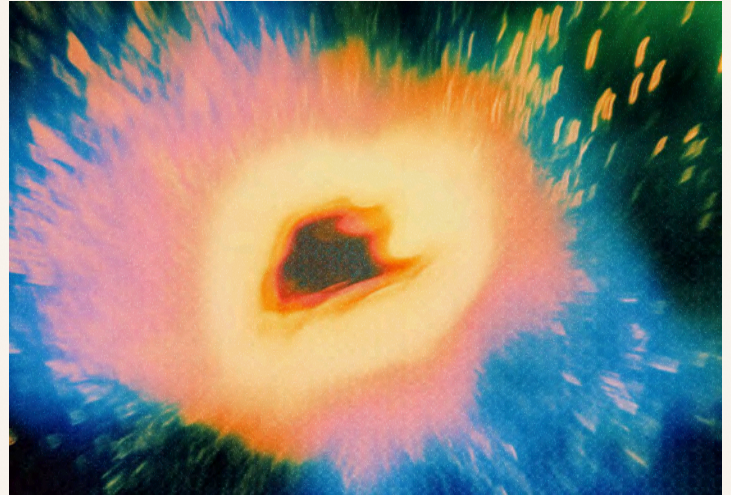
Spontaneity and play

Unstructured, organic moments where participants engage creatively and intuitively, free from predefined outcomes or structures. Both spontaneity and play emerged as contributors to participants' experiences of awe.

Dropping the expectation of intellectualization

As one participant reflected, “There wasn’t enough space to just feel—I wanted less thinking and more presence.” This sentiment underscores the importance of creating intentional spaces where participants can pause, process, and engage with their emotions. Another participant echoed this, describing how the fast-paced transitions left them feeling unsettled: “I felt rushed to process one session before jumping into another, and the emotions got lost in the shuffle.”

By contrast, the gathering’s moments of collective spontaneity and unstructured play stood out as highlights for many participants. These moments, such as the group collage activity, created an environment where awe could flourish through creativity, collaboration, and an absence of rigid expectations. Participants were able to step out of the intellectual mindset and into a more intuitive and exploratory space, fostering deeper connections and a sense of wonder.



One participant recounted their experience of awe at the collage station: “Sunday morning, we went to La Muralla, and some folks put on a collage station. It was pure play and exploration with no expectations. It felt collaborative and wonderful. (...) It was quite an intellectual event. And I think there was a need from me and in others to move that around. To not just be in the intellectual state. To find the childlike wonder state.”

These spontaneous, less-curated moments also created opportunities for participants to connect more authentically. As one participant shared, “I was quite taken by the instant connections that everybody was able to make... It wasn’t really like a curated safe space—it was just like, here we are. And somehow people were able to really connect.”

Others felt similarly during the last moments of the gathering. “When people started dancing at the afterparty, it was like, ‘Are these the same people who were at the conference?’ It felt surreal, beautiful, and mystical.”

Moments of play, presence, and spontaneity are not just complementary but essential for cultivating awe and fostering deeper connections.

The beauty of nature

Nature emerged as a profound source of awe, offering participants moments of reflection, connection, and gratitude. Whether through immersive natural settings (by the ocean) or curated environments that incorporated natural elements (orange trees at the venue), participants found inspiration and a sense of belonging in their interactions with the natural world.

Gathering in spaces with access to natural beauty

The gathering took place in spaces proximate to natural beauty including the ocean, sky, and fruit trees. The proximity provided participants with a sense of grounding and connection to something greater than themselves. Reflecting on an experience sitting by a tree, one participant noted: “Touching the earth... after having talked about collective consciousness, centering other species and all this kind of stuff. It marked me.”

These moments were not only restorative but also served as reminders of humanity’s interconnectedness with the broader ecosystem. By engaging directly with natural elements, participants found opportunities to reflect.

“The beauty of the palace with the greenery, the oranges, and the colors on the floor made me feel grateful and lucky to be there.” Some participants reflected on the importance of stepping in and out of the ‘flow’ of the gathering by spending moments alone with the natural beauty of the space. Whether taking short walks around the venue, sitting under a tree, or watching the sky on the rooftop.

Similarly, experiences by the ocean offered symbolic moments of awe and reflection:

“We found ourselves at sunset, in between the two continents, and you know, the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. It was such a high moment to wrap everything—it’s very symbolic. That was beautiful.”

These encounters highlighted how integrating natural elements into gatherings can elevate the experience and offer opportunity not just for awe, but for gratitude.

Moments of stillness with nature

For many participants, moments spent in stillness with nature brought a profound sense of peace and fulfillment. Watching a sunset, in particular, stood out as a universal source of awe:

“We basically stood by watching the sun go down until the very last moment, because we couldn’t take our eyes away. It was amazing.”

“Oh wow... Watching the sunset on that last day, in silence. I remember that for sure.”

These moments allowed participants to pause, to digest the intensity of the gathering itself, and to enter a state of presence. The mindfulness that emerged from the combination of stillness and nature provided fertile ground for awe to be experienced.



Art and music

Music as connection

Music has the unique ability to dissolve barriers and create collective energy, and this was evident during the gathering. For some participants, live musical performances sparked emotions of awe.

“The music touched me in ways I can’t quite describe. Healing...”

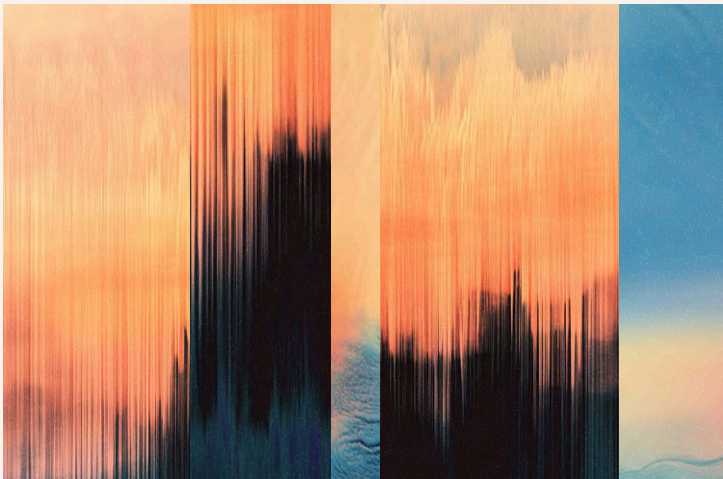
Artistic spaces as places to process emotions

Art has the power to evoke awe by offering new ways to see truth, process emotions, and reflect on ourselves and our surroundings. At this gathering, art created spaces for participants to confront personal and collective realities, encouraging introspection and emotional engagement.

The gallery served as a space for deep reflection. One participant shared, “The gallery, hearing the women’s stories, and reading about their experiences brought tears to my eyes. It was a lot to process.” The exhibits provided a chance to sit with complex emotions and see life from perspectives that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Similarly, a film screening challenged participants and evoked moments of awe. “I really enjoyed the film screening,” one participant said. “It was impactful for me, left me feeling lots of things probably because it captured narratives that I don’t hear as much... it challenged social conventions.” These moments were not about offering answers, but about creating room for participants to consider their own beliefs and experiences in a new light.

The art encouraged participants to pause, process, and connect more deeply with their own realities and the stories of others.



Patterns of disconnection

Sources of disconnection and disengagement highlighted by the focus group

These themes emerged during post-gathering conversations with focus group attendees. While they do not directly correlate with the potential for awe to exist at gatherings, they significantly contribute to reduced levels of connection with others, the programming, and overall engagement with the event experience. Recognizing these patterns of disconnection is crucial for designing future gatherings that intentionally incorporate pathways to foster awe.

Focus on intellectual over emotional engagement

Some participants felt the gathering leaned too heavily on intellectual stimulation, leaving little space to process the emotions tied to the event's themes and interactions.

"I just wanted to like, have my own time and like box myself out a bit."

More than half of the participants expressed a need for more intentional opportunities to step back, reflect, and engage emotionally rather than constantly intellectualizing the content.

Diverse expectations

Not everyone approached the gathering with the same goals or thresholds for experiencing awe. For some, the event was seen as a professional opportunity rather than a deeply transformative experience.

"I wasn't really looking for awe—I came to network, and learn new things, and that's what I got."

In-group and out-group dynamics

Some participants noted barriers that impeded connections, rooted in subtle social dynamics that created a sense of exclusion for certain individuals. One participant's observations shed light on these barriers: "There was something about, like, the cool kids versus the not-so-cool kids thing going on."

The participant goes on to describe how they noticed a distinct division between those who dressed to adopt a specific identity or be part of the dominant aesthetic, which created divisions between the 'in group' and 'out group'—the subtle perceived social identities that can create barriers to connection.

Gaps in grouping and representation

Some social dynamics hindered genuine connection for some attendees, specifically along racial and cultural lines.

One participant reflected, "How do you break the barriers so people connect? I don't know if you noticed it, but I at least thought that there was also racial grouping throughout." and "Towards the end, I started really looking at who's also missing, who's not here who could have been here." one participant shared in relation to their Arab identity in relation to the wider community present.

Another shared 'I feel like I wasn't experiencing the culture [of Morocco]. I was in the place physically, but like, I wasn't, you know? I wasn't connected to the culture within the experience.'

Insights for event designers and facilitators

Awe is not a destination; it is a powerful entry point into deeper engagement. However, without thoughtful design, awe can remain a fleeting emotion, leaving participants inspired but ungrounded. The challenge lies in “closing the loop” by helping participants metabolize awe, turning it into meaningful shifts.

Metabolizing awe

Moving from thinking to feeling

Anchoring awe in inner and outer shifts

The destabilizing nature of awe—its capacity to challenge assumptions and open up new possibilities—is its greatest strength, but only if we allow time to process it.

Insights for event designers and facilitators

Metabolizing awe

Awe exists in a liminal space, often destabilizing participants by exposing them to both the vast and the unknown. This duality—the awesome and the awful—requires intentional scaffolding to help participants process and integrate their experiences.

Offering scaffolding

Gatherings providing tools and moments for participants to unpack their emotions and explore their significance will better position themselves to create significant shifts, connections and impact longterm. Reflection prompts, guided discussions, and meditative activities are effective ways to achieve this.

Offering unstructured time

Pauses in the program allow participants to simply be present, fostering personal reflection, processing, and play!

Moving from thinking to feeling

Modern gatherings often emphasize intellectual stimulation over emotional engagement, making it difficult for participants to fully inhabit a “feeling space.” Awe thrives when participants are invited to connect with their surroundings, their bodies, and their senses. Balancing intellectual rigor with emotional presence ensures participants engage on multiple levels, leading to more profound and lasting experiences.

Sensory engagement

Incorporating music, art, and movement activities fosters a deeper emotional connection.

Encouraging presence

Facilitating moments of awareness, such as guided walks or sensory-focused activities, helps participants reconnect with themselves and their environment.

Insights for event designers and facilitators

Anchoring awe in inner and outer shifts

Awe is not inherently actionable. To support participants in processing these profound experiences, gatherings must provide pathways for both integration and accommodation.

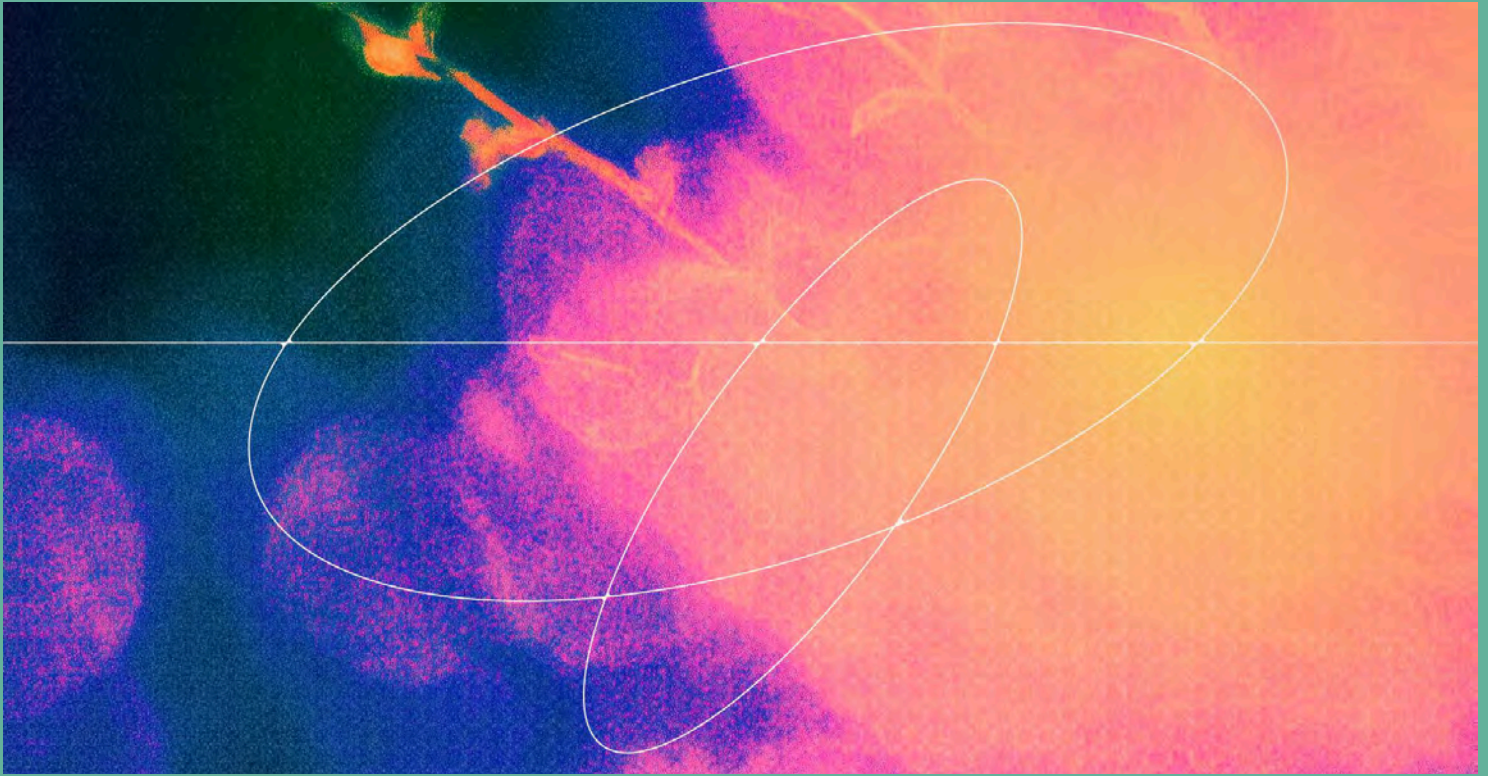
Integration and accommodation

Participants benefit most when offered both tools for integration and space for accommodation. Integration works when awe experiences offer actionable insights that can be woven into existing frameworks—providing participants with practices, connections, or perspectives that enhance their current work and life structures. However, some awe experiences resist integration. When awe fundamentally disrupts worldviews or reveals uncomfortable truths, accommodation becomes essential. This means creating supportive structures that allow participants to sit with disorientation, to hold contradictions, and to let new ways of seeing coexist with old ones without rushing toward resolution.

What's often overlooked is accommodation scaffolding—community circles, reflective rituals, space for silence, ongoing connection points—that support participants through the longer process of making space for what is 'becoming'. This scaffolding recognizes that not everything needs to fit neatly into existing life structures. Sometimes, the most profound transformation happens when we learn to live with new perspectives that don't yet have a clear place in our daily routines, our work, or our relationships. The goal is plurality; holding space for both action and mystery, integration and accommodation, knowing and not-knowing, allowing multiple truths and ways of being to coexist without forcing resolution or coherence.

Closing the loop on awe

Cultivating awe and impact in gatherings



Weave in pathways to awe

Incorporate a variety of awe-inspiring experiences—such as nature, music, moral beauty, and more—to resonate with a diverse range of participants. Design moments of surprise and novelty that challenge assumptions and invite deeper reflection. Draw on the eight pathways of awe identified by Dr. Dacher Keltner, crafting opportunities that engage participants through different entry points, ensuring a rich, and multifaceted emotional experience.

Scaffold process

Build in structured time for processing experiences, such as journaling, dialogues, or storytelling. Equip facilitators to guide participants through both integration and accommodation.

Design for space, solitude, and solidarity

Packed programming often leaves little room for participants to truly absorb and process their emotional experiences. Awe requires breathing space—a chance to sit with its destabilizing nature and let it foster reflection and transformation. Designing for space and solitude ensures participants can savor and internalize these moments before re-entering the collective.

Equally important is designing for solidarity: creating opportunities where awe inspires a shared sense of purpose and commitment. These gatherings thrive when individual experiences connect to collective action, reinforcing the idea that awe is not just an emotional high, but a catalyst for meaningful, sustained impact.

Appendix

Spotlighting practitioners guiding emotional processing for meaningful change

Dr. Renée Lertzman: Bridging psychology and climate change

Dr. Renée Lertzman is a leading climate psychologist who specializes in addressing the emotional and psychological dimensions of environmental crises. She advocates for creating intentional spaces where individuals and communities can process emotions like anxiety, grief, ambivalence, and aspiration—feelings that often arise in the face of climate change. By focusing on these internal landscapes, Dr. Lertzman equips individuals to move from states of overwhelm and paralysis to proactive, meaningful engagement. Her approach emphasizes the critical link between emotional resilience and systemic change, enabling participants to metabolize their experiences into motivation and transformation.

Dr. Vanessa Andreotti: Decolonial futures and emotional composting

Dr. Vanessa Andreotti is an educator, philosopher, and advocate for decolonial approaches to social and environmental movements. Her concept of “emotional composting” encourages individuals and communities to metabolize discomfort, grief, and loss as part of the transformative process. She emphasizes the need to create spaces where people can sit with complexity and endings, allowing new perspectives and possibilities to emerge. Andreotti’s work challenges dominant narratives and invites participants to embrace non-linear, interconnected ways of understanding and acting in the world.

Dr. Joanna Macy: The work that reconnects

Dr. Joanna Macy is a pioneering thinker whose work intersects Buddhism, systems thinking, and deep ecology. She developed *The Work That Reconnects*, a transformative framework designed to guide individuals through feelings of despair, fear, and apathy about the state of the world. This methodology takes participants through a spiral process: beginning with gratitude, then honoring the pain of the world, seeing with new eyes, and concluding with actionable steps to move forward. Macy’s work fosters a deep sense of connection—to self, others, and the planet—empowering individuals and groups to channel their emotions into collaborative, life-affirming action.

Adrienne Maree Brown: Emergent strategy and collective transformation

Adrienne Maree Brown is a writer, activist, and facilitator who explores how collective practices and adaptive approaches can transform communities and movements. Her concept of Emergent Strategy draws inspiration from nature’s principles of resilience, interdependence, and non-linearity. Brown emphasizes the importance of creating gatherings that honor emotion, connection, and creativity, providing spaces where participants can metabolize experiences and emerge with a renewed sense of agency and purpose.

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Disclaimer

This report is based on conversations with participants conducted before and after the House of Beautiful Business' *Between the Two of Us* gathering. The reflections shared are anonymous and have been synthesized to highlight insights into how awe can shape transformative experiences.

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This insights guide was created by Laura François, Director of Awe Exchange—a nonprofit laboratory advancing awe-based changemaking. To learn more about our work and explore additional resources,

www.awe.exchange



The House of Beautiful Business is the network for the life-centered economy. Our mission is to create a new kind of business that is more purposeful, inclusive, and sustainable, in one word: beautiful.

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