



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

## Down to Earth: The Overview Effect

Clay Nelson © 11 July 2021

When I offer a sermon topic of your choice at our annual Service Auction, I take a big risk. David Fougere might win it. Today's musing is courtesy of David. He asked me to reflect on "The Overview Effect." The what?!?!

It turns out to be awe and wonder on steroids. The term was created by astronaut Frank White. The overview effect is a cognitive shift in awareness reported by some astronauts during spaceflight, often while viewing the Earth from outer space. As of 17 June, 2021, only 570 astronauts from 41 countries have had the opportunity to experience it.

Existentially, it could be the best example yet of being "spaced out"? When in space, astronauts have repeatedly reported inexplicable euphoria, a "cosmic connection" or an increased sensitivity to their place in the Universe. The experience sounds like the ultimate high, or the ultimate enlightening; it would appear that without trying, astronauts are able to attain a mental state similar to meditating Buddhist monks. So what is happening when the human body is in space? Does zero-gravity create new connections in the brain? Or is it a natural human response to the vastness of space and realising just how small we are in comparison? Whatever the reason, even when astronauts are back on solid ground, they have changed profoundly...

On 6 March, 1969, Rusty Schweikart experienced a feeling that the whole universe was profoundly connected. At the time, he was on a postponed space walk outside his Apollo 9 Lunar Module, carrying out tests for the forthcoming Moon landings. He described the euphoric sensation this way:

*"When you go around the Earth in an hour and a half, you begin to recognise that your identity is with that whole thing. That makes a change... it comes through to you so powerfully that you're the sensing element for Man." — Russell "Rusty" Schweikart*

Two years later, Apollo 14 astronaut, Edgar Mitchell (joint record holder with Alan Shepard for longest ever Moon walk of 9 hours and 17 minutes) reported experiencing an "Overview Effect". He described the sensation gave him a profound sense of connectedness, with a feeling of bliss and timelessness. He was overwhelmed by the experience. He became profoundly aware that each and every atom in the Universe was connected in some way, and on seeing Earth from space he had an understanding that all the humans, animals and systems were a part of the same thing, a synergistic whole. It was an *interconnected euphoria*.

The screen saver on my TV is a video of the Earth from the international space station. While it is mesmerising I don't experience the overview effect. It can't be experienced from Earth, only from space. So unless you have booked a ticket on a planned private flight to the space station — they are \$US55 million each — then you probably won't. There are efforts to recreate it in virtual reality, but it hasn't yet been fully achieved. That being the case, I'm certainly not going to recreate it in my musings, but I did find a video that might give you a better sense of it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4wgxYLHFLA&t=606s>

I remember that Christmas Eve vividly. I was at my grandparents in San Francisco for the holidays. I went out for a walk. The fog had lifted and I had a clear view of the moon and marvelled that three men were currently orbiting it. Ever since JFK and Sputnik, getting to the moon had been presented as the goal. It turned out to be much more. It was a step in our human evolution when we saw our fragile home hanging in space through the astronauts' eyes and everything changed not just for them but for all of us. We raced to the moon only to discover Earth. Awe and wonder can do that even for us down on Earth. It is never anticipated.

Awe and wonder remove our blind spots. We can see reality and ourselves with greater clarity. And once seen they can't be unseen.

Awe and wonder are a powerful state characterised by amazement, fascination, or being moved and touched. Research has shown that two things in particular can promote a feeling of awe — aesthetic beauty and a sense of vastness. Nature in particular has been hailed as a great source of awe because, not only are things like trees and flowers aesthetically pleasing to look at, but places like the Milford Sound or a tramp through the Southern Alps can make one feel ever-so-small in comparison.

When we think about the overview effect, viewing Earth from outer space might provide an even greater natural beauty and scaling vastness to transform awe into this "life-changing" state. Simply put, seeing our planet in a black sky not only makes it seem even more vibrant and beautiful, but seeing it as a collective whole promotes a feeling of unity and connectedness with the Earth.

An experience of awe or of being overpowered can be channelled into positive outcomes, even social transformation, and humanity may benefit, rather than suffer, from being made to confront the extreme in outer space and elsewhere. For instance, feelings of awe can be associated with increased creativity and ability to collaborate. When a person or community's sense of what is "really real" is transformed, particularly if this new "reality" is seen in a welcome light, there may be additional benefits, including increased morale and motivation. So where might the Earth-bound get a taste of this life-changing experience

Worship in community, on all-too-rare occasions, has the capacity to lift us into this out-of-world dimension. At its best worship creates the sense of connection and oneness that invites awe. From that overview we are able to be a collective force for protecting this fragile island home and its inhabitants. May it be so.

**Meditation / Conversation starter:**

Share an experience of awe and wonder in your life.

What difference did it make in your life?