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Embracing the Awe of Mystery to Become a Better Lawyer
How Wonder, Humility, and Curiosity Can Transform the Practice of Law

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Embracing the Awe of Mystery to Become a Better Lawyer

Embracing the Awe of Mystery:

How Wonder, Humility, and Curiosity Can Transform the Practice of Law

Albert Einstein once wrote that the most beautiful experience we are to experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He called it the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of genuine art and science: whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead. Einstein was not a man given to idle sentiment. He meant it. When you sit with that thought for a moment—a man who reshaped our understanding of space and time pointing to *wonder* as the animating force of his greatest work—something shifts.

Lawyers are trained to seek answers. To reduce uncertainty. To persuade, to argue, to close. The practice of law rewards precision, preparation, and the ability to anticipate and counter what is unknown. And yet, this very training calcifies into a kind of intellectual rigidity—a habit of demanding certainty in a universe that offers none. The world’s greatest scientists, artists, and thinkers have long understood something that the legal profession has been slower to embrace: that sitting with mystery, cultivating awe, and accepting that we cannot know everything are not signs of weakness. They are, in fact, sources of remarkable professional and personal strength.

This article explores the concept of the “awe of mystery” — what it is, why it matters, and how lawyers at every stage of their careers will benefit from making it a daily companion.

WHAT IS THE AWE OF MYSTERY?

The “awe of mystery” is not mysticism. It is not a retreat from reason. It is, rather, the profound sense of wonder, curiosity, and humility felt when encountering the vast, unknown, or complex aspects of existence—from the cosmos to the inner self. It is what happens when you see something that ought to be impossible, and then discover it is real. It is the feeling you get when science seemingly runs out of answers and something undeniably true may remain standing.

Consider some examples from the natural world that science has not yet fully explained. The aurora borealis—the Northern Lights—is a visual representation of Earth’s magnetic shield interacting with the sun. We understand a lot about it. Yet remarkably, the aurora sometimes produces sound that can be heard at ground level, even though the light display occurs 60 to 200 miles above the Earth, in air far too thin to carry sound. Scientists cannot yet explain the precise mechanism by which the atmosphere discharges sound in synchrony with light occurring hundreds of miles above. The aurora also sometimes forms massive, pulsating geometric shapes resembling the Greek letter omega, stretching for hundreds of miles—perfectly repeated structures whose exact physics remain a subject of intense scientific debate.

Or consider the Monarch butterfly, which migrates up to 3,000 miles to specific overwintering locations in Mexico that its ancestors used—despite the fact that no individual butterfly ever makes the return trip. The complete cycle takes up to five generations. Each generation somehow knows exactly where to go, though they have never been there and have no teacher to guide them. The precise location, down to a specific grove of trees, appears

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possibly to be encoded in the insect's DNA across generations.

Or the octopus, a creature with nine brains—one central brain and eight mini-brains, one in each arm, each capable of acting independently. The octopus can solve puzzles, use tools, recognize individual human faces, and demonstrate a sleep cycle that mirrors the two-stage pattern of human sleep. Perhaps most astonishingly, the octopus is color blind, and yet it can perfectly match the color and texture of its surroundings. Scientists believe its skin may “see” light directly through light-sensing proteins, bypassing its eyes entirely.

Then there is the underground fungal network—the “Wood Wide Web.” Mycelia create vast subterranean networks connecting trees and plants, through which nutrients are traded and warnings of insect attacks are transmitted. This network can redirect resources from a healthy tree to a dying one. Recent studies have found that fungi send electrical impulses through these networks that look remarkably like human speech—with computer analysis identifying up to 50 distinct clusters of activity. Without a brain or central nervous system, fungi appear to make decisions, demonstrate memory, and engage in something that looks, from the outside, like communication. Scientists are actively debating whether fungi are, in some sense, conscious.

These are not fringe curiosities. They are documented, peer-reviewed phenomena that have upended expectations in biology, neuroscience, and physics. The awe of mystery is the feeling these discoveries produce—not anxiety at not knowing, but wonder at the inexhaustible depth of what remains to be understood.

And the mystery runs all the way to the mathematical. The fine structure constant— $1/137.036$ —is a fundamental dimensionless number that has been present since the Big Bang. It quantifies the strength of the electromagnetic force between elementary charged particles. If it were even four percent different, albeit slightly simplifying this discussion, there would be no stable matter and no stable life in the universe. It is in galaxies, in planets, in every cell of the human body. We know its value with extraordinary precision. We have no idea why the universe chose that number.

There also is the Fibonacci sequence—0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21—where each number is the sum of the two before it. As the numbers grow larger, the ratio between consecutive numbers converges on approximately 1.618, known as the Golden Ratio. This ratio appears in the spiral of sunflower seeds, the arrangement of pinecone scales, the proportions of the human face, the arms and fingers, the double helix of DNA, the patterns of waves, hurricane spirals, and the shape of galaxies. The same mathematical proportions are woven through human anatomy and the farthest reaches of the cosmos. As the astrophysicist Carl Sagan observed, we are made of star stuff. The math in our fingers is the math of the universe.

The awe of mystery is not just about these specific phenomena. It is a posture—a way of standing in the world that remains open to being surprised, moved, and humbled. It is the recognition that we are all interconnected in ways we cannot fully understand, and that this interconnection is not a problem to be solved, but a source of meaning and growth.

THE AWE OF MYSTERY AND THE LEGAL MIND

Lawyers spend their careers training the part of the brain that detects risk, anticipates objections, and demands precision. These are valuable, even essential skills. But the same training that makes a great litigator or deal-maker may, over time, narrow the aperture through which a lawyer sees the world. The relentless focus on certainty, control, and winning can crowd out curiosity, humility, and wonder.

Legal careers have been compared to the myth of Sisyphus—eternally pushing a boulder up a hill, only to have it roll back down. Individual cases pile on top of one another. Demands multiply. The pressure to have answers, to

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project confidence, and to reduce uncertainty can be relentless. In this environment, it is easy to lose perspective. You can see only one mushroom while walking through miles of fungal colony. You miss the forest for the trees.

The antidote is not to abandon rigor. It is to expand the frame. The awe of mystery offers lawyers something their training often does not: perspective.

PRACTICAL BENEFITS OF THE AWE OF MYSTERY FOR LAWYERS

HUMILITY AS A PROFESSIONAL ASSET

The universe is under no obligation to make sense to you. That line, attributed to the astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, captures something that lawyers would do well to internalize. The greatest scientific minds in history have been humbled by what they do not know. Dark matter and dark energy constitute roughly 95 percent of the universe. We cannot see either. We cannot directly detect either. We know they are there only because of their gravitational effects on what we can observe. The universe, in other words, is almost entirely a mystery. The part we understand is a tiny sliver.

For lawyers, this is a useful corrective. Humility about the limits of our knowledge is not weakness; it is sophistication. In advocacy, a lawyer who genuinely understands what they do not know is better positioned than one who projects false certainty. In counseling, a lawyer who says, “I don’t know, but let’s think through this together” builds more trust than one who improvises confident-sounding answers. In negotiation, the lawyer who has made peace with uncertainty is less likely to be rattled when the unexpected happens.

One of the roundtable discussion questions that accompanies this topic asks: “In what ways can humility about what we don’t know improve our advocacy, leadership, or relationships with clients and colleagues?” It is worth sitting with that question seriously. The lawyer who approaches a complex case with genuine intellectual humility—who does not presume to know the outcome, who remains genuinely curious about the other side’s position—often sees things that a more certain colleague misses.

PERSPECTIVE AND THE ANTIDOTE TO BURNOUT

The fireflies of the Great Smoky Mountains offer an unexpected lesson in perspective. One particular species, *Photinus carolinus*, gathers in swarms of tens of millions and synchronizes its flashing so that it pulses as one—a cascading wave of light stretching over miles of terrain. The synchronicity begins only above a certain population density; below that threshold, they flash randomly. Scientists do not know how they coordinate. There is no leader. And yet they move as one.

Lawyers, particularly those in large firms or at major international organizations, are part of something larger than themselves—a global network of colleagues working in different jurisdictions, different cultures, different legal traditions, all serving clients and contributing to the rule of law. The awe of mystery invites us to see that network not as an abstraction but as something genuinely remarkable. Appreciating your place in the universe gives you perspective. Most importantly, it gives you humility. It helps you value relationships. It also inspires creative problem-solving.

Legal burnout is frequently traced to a loss of meaning—the sense that the work is endless and without larger significance. The awe of mystery does not solve that problem directly. But it provides a different vantage point from which to look at it. When you appreciate that the math in your fingers is the same math that shapes the Milky Way—that you are literally made of the elements forged in stars—the relentless demands of the next brief or negotiation can feel, if not lighter, then at least differently situated. You are part of something vast and

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interconnected. The work matters. But so does the view from above it.

CURIOSITY AND CREATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING

The human brain is capable of far more than most of us demand of it. One of the more striking phenomena in neuroscience is Acquired Savant Syndrome—a rare condition in which a person suddenly develops extraordinary, genius-level skills after a traumatic brain injury or neurological event. Individuals with no prior musical training suddenly play concert-level piano. Others develop the ability to calculate accurately complex mathematical sequences, or to speak fluent foreign languages they had only basic exposure to before their injury.

Science has no complete explanation for this. What it suggests, however, is that the brain has untapped capacities that our habits of thought—and the routines of professional life—may prevent us from accessing. The lawyer who becomes genuinely curious about the world beyond their practice area, who reads broadly, who steps outside of professional norms to encounter art, science, philosophy, and nature, may find that this exposure cultivates a kind of thinking that the pure grind of legal work does not.

Many of the greatest breakthroughs in law, science, and art have come from discomfort around the unknown—from the willingness to sit with a problem without immediately reaching for the habitual answer. Lawyers who cultivate genuine curiosity are better at finding creative solutions, at seeing connections across domains, and at asking the question that no one else thought to ask. That capacity is not diminished by exposure to mystery. It is sharpened by it.

In an era of artificial intelligence, this matters more than ever. AI processes knowledge at scales no human can match. But it cannot bring a unique human perspective, a sense of wonder, a compassionate imagination, or a creative intuition cultivated through a life lived with curiosity. The lawyers who will matter most in the coming decades are those who bring something that cannot be replicated: themselves.

COMPASSION AND HUMAN CONNECTION

Elephants use specialized nerve endings in their feet to detect low-frequency vibrations traveling through the ground, conducted through their leg bones to their middle ear. Through this mechanism, they can sense distant storms, earthquakes, or the movement of other elephants from miles away. More remarkable still, researchers have found that elephants have specific signature rumbles that serve as names—names for individual herd members, and names for locations. They are able to, it appears, discuss one another and where they are going. They maintain lifelong friendships, mourn their dead, and soothe distressed companions with gentle touch.

The awe of mystery, when genuinely internalized, tends to produce compassion. When you appreciate the extraordinary complexity and fragility of consciousness—in animals, in fungi, in human beings—it becomes harder to treat people as obstacles or instruments. Clients are not just matters to be resolved. Opposing lawyers are not just adversaries to be outmaneuvered. They are extraordinarily complex beings navigating an existence that no one fully understands.

The lawyer who carries a sense of genuine wonder about human experience—who finds other people interesting rather than merely useful or problematic—tends to build deeper client relationships, earn more trust, and navigate conflict with greater skill. Awe, it turns out, is not a soft skill. It is a relational and strategic one.

EMBRACING UNCERTAINTY AS A PROFESSIONAL STRENGTH

Since the 12th century, people have reported seeing glowing spheres during storms that drift, pass through doors and windows, and sometimes explode. They are called ball lightning. They are not lightning. They are not

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plasma. Science has no consensus on what they are or how they form. They are, in every sense, unexplained. And yet they are real.

The legal system, too, contains phenomena that resist clean explanation. Why do juries decide as they do? How does a judge's mood on a given morning affect the arc of a case? Why do some negotiations that appear destined for settlement collapse at the last moment, while others that seemed hopeless resolve unexpectedly? The practice of law involves an irreducible uncertainty that no amount of preparation fully eliminates.

The lawyer who has made peace with mystery—who has genuinely accepted that some outcomes cannot be controlled or predicted—is better equipped to serve clients in these moments. They are less prone to over-promising. They are more resilient when things do not go as planned. They can distinguish between what is knowable and what is not, and they communicate that distinction with clarity and honesty. And perhaps most importantly, they do not experience each setback as a personal failure—because they understand that uncertainty is not a deficiency in their preparation. It is a feature of the universe.

INCORPORATING THE AWE OF MYSTERY INTO DAILY PRACTICE

Appreciating your place in the universe is not something that happens automatically. It requires cultivation. There are practical habits that lawyers can develop to invite more wonder and perspective into their professional lives.

Disconnect to reconnect. One of the most important insights from any genuine engagement with the natural world is the necessity of disconnection. We must disconnect from the constant demands of email, notifications, and the professional urgency machine if we want to reconnect to a different kind of awareness. Take a slow walk in a park or along a greenway. Notice a butterfly, a bird, or the ants building their quiet civilization underfoot. The miraculous is everywhere, if you slow down enough to see it.

Cultivate morning practice. Daily meditation or quiet reflection—before the day's demands take over—offers a window to the wider view. It is an opportunity to remember that the case on your desk, however urgent it feels, is one small thread in a vast tapestry. Many lawyers who practice daily reflection report that it gives them perspective, reduces reactive behavior, and improves the quality of their judgment throughout the day.

Read broadly. Science writing, philosophy, natural history, literature—anything that takes you outside the boundaries of your practice area—builds the cross-domain thinking that generates creative insight. The lawyer who knows something about mycology, or quantum physics, or the migration of birds, has more material to draw on when approaching a problem that has not previously been seen.

Ask better questions. The Fermi Paradox—physicist Enrico Fermi's famous 1950 question, "Where is everybody?"—launched decades of scientific inquiry into the possibility of extraterrestrial intelligence. The best lawyers, like the best scientists, are those who ask the question that no one else thought to ask. Genuine curiosity—the kind produced by a real appreciation of how much we do not know—generates better questions.

Invest in peer relationships. The weaver bird does not build alone. These remarkable architects, found primarily in Africa, construct intricate hanging nests and massive, multi-generational communal structures. The legal profession—at its best—operates the same way. Organizations that bring together lawyers from different countries, practice areas, and cultures create the conditions for the kind of cross-pollination that generates new ideas and approaches. Investing in those relationships, and approaching colleagues with genuine curiosity rather than transactional interest, is one of the most productive things a lawyer can do for their long-term career.

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These habits are not expensive or time-consuming. They require only a willingness to look up from the desk and to allow the world to be larger than the next filing deadline.

WE ARE ALL INTERCONNECTED

Perhaps the most profound takeaway from a genuine engagement with the awe of mystery is the recognition that we are all interconnected in ways we cannot fully understand. The same mathematical proportions found in your fingers are found in the farthest galaxies. The electrical signals that fungi use to communicate with each other look, to a computer, like human speech. The birds that navigate 3,000 miles to a specific grove of trees are following what appears to be a map encoded across five generations of ancestors they never met.

What does this mean for the lawyer sitting across a table from an opposing party, or advising a client in a moment of crisis, or mentoring a young associate who is losing their enthusiasm for the work? It means that the relationship in front of you is not incidental. It is part of a larger web of connection that extends, quite literally, to the stars.

The legal profession exists to serve justice and to help people navigate the most difficult moments of their lives. That is an extraordinary thing with which to be entrusted. The awe of mystery does not make that work easier. But it gives it a context that sustains meaning, restores perspective, and reminds us—when we most need reminding—why we chose this work in the first place.

CONCLUSION: MAYBE IT'S NOT THE ANSWERS THAT MATTER

To day, scientists have no explanation for what ball lightning is. They also have no full explanation for how the Monarch butterfly knows where to fly, how the fireflies know when to synchronize, or why the fine structure constant is $1/137$. The questions these phenomena raise may never be fully resolved. And that is not a failure of science. It is an invitation.

Maybe it's not the answers that matter. Maybe it's the sense of awe—the sense of wonder—that is most important. Indeed, that sense of wonder makes us better observers, better listeners, better questioners, and ultimately better lawyers. It is what prevents the legal mind from becoming a machine that processes inputs and generates outputs, and keeps it what it must be: a human intelligence, capable of empathy, creativity, judgment, and wisdom.

Take the time to slow down. Feel the force around you. The math in your fingers is in the farthest reaches of the universe. You are, in the most literal sense, made of star stuff. That is a remarkable thing to be. It is worth pausing, now and then, to appreciate it.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

The following questions are offered as prompts for personal reflection or group discussion among lawyers and legal professionals:

How does your legal training shape your relationship with uncertainty or ambiguity? Do you recall a moment in your practice when not knowing all the answers led to growth—for you or your client?

What role does curiosity play in your daily legal work, and how can you cultivate more of it?

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How might embracing mystery help sustain a sense of wonder or meaning in a demanding legal career?

Many breakthroughs in law, science, and art began with discomfort around the unknown. How might lawyers apply that mindset to complex or novel legal problems?

What practical habits could help you invite more wonder into your work—reflective writing, time in nature, exposure to science or the arts?

How might viewing legal systems as evolving mysteries rather than static codes influence how you mentor the next generation of lawyers?

What's one mystery—professional, personal, or philosophical—you are currently learning to live with?