

Awesomely Awestruck

By Dennis Payton Knight

Awe is a noun meaning a feeling of reverential respect mixed with fear or wonder. *Amazement* and *astonishment* are synonyms, and it might seem crazy, but the words, *dread*, *terror* and *fear* are synonyms, too. It is such a contrary word; how can you not be awestruck?

Awe is a great example of a contranym, a word that can have opposite meanings. More simply, it is a word that serves as its own antonym.

Awe is part of *awesome*, and it is part of *awful*. The roots are the same, *awe* meaning what I said above, and *ful* and *some* each meaning *worthy of*, or *commanding something*. *Awful* dates to 1000 AD, and originally meant what *awesome* does today, but within a few hundred years it devolved to mean something dreadful. In the case of this meandering essay, it can also mean something becoming too wordy, as in "this is getting *awfully* long."

The use of the word *awesome* was first recorded in 1598, and it came about for the simple reason that *awful* had gotten so awful. *Awesome* itself is *awfully* nice, and *awfully* is a contranym on a contranym. Are you awestruck yet?

Oversight is another contranym. It can mean *something missed*, and it can mean to *oversee* a process to prevent *oversights*. Surely the awful *oversights* in the building of Denver's new VA hospital wouldn't have happened if there had been more *oversight*. Was the money *appropriated* for its construction *inappropriately appropriated* to someone else's profit? And isn't a bank bailout the same as *holding up* a bank? But in reverse?

If things are going *downhill*, they're getting *awful*, but if we're in the *downhill* part of a project, they're getting *awesome*. When the governor *sanctions* the selling of marijuana, he is giving permission to do it. When the feds *sanction* you for selling marijuana, they're telling you not to do it.

I *buckled* my suspenders so tight my back *buckled*. Why do I shut the alarm *off* when it goes *off*? When I add greenery to make my steak look nice, I am *garnishing* it, but if I don't pay for my garnish, the grocer will ask the judge to *garnish* some greenery out of my bank account. When the judge orders someone to *continue*, it means to keep talking, but if he orders something to be *continued*, it means he's stopping it.

When the girl's locks get *raveled* in knots, her mother *ravels* it with a comb, then she *clips* her bangs and *clips* a ribbon in her hair. She *dusts* the furniture before she *dusts* the donuts.

Why do we avoid stormy *weather* but *weather* the storm? Why do the stars come *out* when the lights go *out*? Why does *fighting* in a bar get us tossed in jail, but *fighting* in a war get us a medal?

And, finally, please do not *execute* me for my flawless *execution* of this awfully awesome essay. Now are you awestruck?