

Night of Wonder

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A journalist by the name of Jacob Needleman wrote this account:

I was invited by *Time* magazine to be a participant observer at the launch of Apollo 17. At that time, there were a lot of cynical people complaining about the space program... It was a night launch, and there were hundreds and hundreds of reporters all over the lawn, drinking beer and waiting for this tall, thirty-five-story-high white rocket lit by these powerful lamps....

Then the countdown came, and then the launch. The first thing you see is this extraordinary orange light, which is just at the limit of light that you can bear to look at... It's beautiful, everything's illuminated with this light. Then comes this slow thing rising up in total silence because it takes a few seconds for the sound to come across. Then you hear a "WHOOOOOH! HHHHMMMM!" It enters right into you. This extraordinary thing is lifting up. Suddenly, among all these cynical people and the wisecracking people, myself included, you could practically hear their jaws dropping. The sense of wonder fills everyone in the whole place, as this thing goes up, and up and up and up. The first stage ignites this beautiful blue flame. It becomes like a star, but you realize there are human beings on it. And then there's total silence.

Then people just get up quietly, helping each other up. They're kind. They open doors. They look at each other, speaking quietly and interestedly. These were suddenly moral people because wonder, the sense of wonder, the experience of wonder, had made them moral.¹

Someone has said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. But there is another that rivals it—wonder. To stand gape-jawed, entranced, a blank to all our oh-so-important plans, mesmerized, lost in the moment of discovery, is flattery. Without saying a word, we declare, "Given all the time in the universe, I could never have conceived of something so ingenious, so breathtaking, so delicately intricate, so overwhelmingly powerful; I am in the presence of something beyond me."

To be in wonder is to knowingly or unknowingly praise. In admiring the object or the act we compliment the doer or the maker. When you sit in rapt wonder, listening to a symphony with a look of pure ecstasy on your face, you flatter the composer who secretly views you from the other side of the concert hall.

Mr. Needleman curiously proclaims that the collective sense of wonder the cynical reporters experienced made them a group of "suddenly moral people." Why was that? Wasn't it because when they began to wonder, they subconsciously began to praise the Creator of all that power and the Maker of the human beings ingenious enough to harness that power? Wasn't it because they had, in fact, begun to touch the holy?

When you are speechless at the Van Gogh painted on a humble moth's wings, when you just can't take your eyes off of a National Geographic special on giraffes, or

whales, or alligators, when you breathe out over and over on a winter's day just to see your breath crystallize, or when you sit and soak in the immense glory of a starry night with the bedspread of heaven thrown over your head, then you have given praise to God.

Some people lose the sense of wonder. Life gets dull and ordinary to them.

Last night I was lying on the couch, tired from a long day, watching a ballgame. From the bathroom, my ten year old son, Matthew, began calling, "Dad, come here!"

Too lazy to get up, I called back, "What do you want, Matthew?"

"There's something really neat in here that I want you to see."

"What?"

"The dirt in the sink looks cool!"

I yelled back, "That's nice," and continued to lie there.

"Daaaad, come here; you've really got to see this."

I finally went into the bathroom, where he excitedly showed me how the soap bubbles had

collected the dirt just washed from his hands in little bubble-combs. It was neat! The world is full of wonder to non-glazed eyes.

Just consider the everyday act of holding a newborn baby—the fragile miniature human who nine months ago was of microscopic proportions, a being who has within the possibility of growing to be a rocket scientist. This little human somehow has a part of you and your spouse inside and, yet, is now a unique mix with a chromosomal map that only God can read. Generations of your family look up at you through that face which is part of a body that has ten beautiful perfectly formed fingers and toes and a tiny heart beating out the tune of life. You have held something wonderful.

Sometimes we Christians read the Bible so much that it becomes commonplace to us—it loses its wonder. Can you make yourself break away from the familiar story and really imagine what it was like for Moses the first time he met God on the mountain?

As Moses was herding the sheep of Jethro, his father-in-law, the Midian priest, he led the flock deeper into the desert and came near Horeb, the mountain of God. There the Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a fiery flame from the center of a thornbush. He gazed and saw the bush afire, but it did not burn up. So Moses said, "I will step aside right now and examine this wonderful sight, why the thornbush is not burned up."

The Lord saw him turn aside to observe and God called to him from the bush: Moses, Moses! He answered, "Here I am." Then He said: Do not move nearer! Take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. He also said, I am your fathers' God, the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob. And Moses covered his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Exodus 3:1-6 Modern Language Bible

Have you read these verses so many times that you have read the wonder out of them? Read them again—more slowly. Put yourself in Moses' sandals. First, he saw a sight the equivalent of seeing the Aurora Borealis for the first time. Then he saw *God*. And the sight made him cover his eyes, for he was afraid to look at God. What did he

see? The folding of time? A myriad of supernovas? The implosion of being? Whatever he saw, it blew every circuit he had.

Now come with me on a rushed journey. Turn off the ballgame, and get off the couch. Slip on your house shoes, and slip out the door. Look up into the immense glory of a starry night with the bedspread of heaven thrown over you. Watch your breath get caught and crystallized. Feel yourself being hurried along by someone tugging at your hand, saying, "Come on, come on, you've got to see this." Experience the queerness of walking through the folds of time, until you realize that you no longer walk on a soft green carpet of grass, but on a hard, pebbly path, worn into a hillside by centuries of animal hooves. See the fires burning in the night on distant hills where a few shapes gather around them. Notice your shadow following you caused by a bright place in the sky that is like looking at the Aurora Borealis for the first time.

Running out of breath, you finally pull back on the hand. "What are we going to see?" you ask. "A baby," comes the reply. *A baby*, you think, *I should have stayed on the couch*. A memory flashes through your mind about the sacred moment when you first held your baby. When you felt her skin and tiny frame, felt his chest heave, and saw the quiver of her heartbeat. When you looked into your baby's eyes and saw the mystery of the bond between you and your spouse looking back at you—small, delicate, but very alive. And you knew, having seen, that you wanted to be a better person, a moral person. Still, people have babies every day, and it has been a long time since you have looked at one with non-glazed eyes.

The hand pulls you up the grade of a hill, the world full of silver and shade, until, finally, you come to a cave that has been modified with rough beams, stick walls, and a doorway to serve as an overnight pen for the sheep you hear bleating through the valley around you. You creep up and look through the stick slats until you see by lamplight some young couple's first bundle of pride and joy. "Why have you brought me all this way to see this baby?" you ask. The voice of a shepherd boy comes back to you in a wide-eyed whisper, "Because an angel told us, that this baby is *God*."

You look again, expecting to see a myriad of supernovas, or the implosion of being. Instead, you see a fragile bubble yawn.

Somehow, you know, you are looking at the greatest wonder there ever was.

Note

¹ Bill Moyers, *A World of Ideas II: Public Opinions from Private Citizen*, ed. Andie Tucher (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 162.