

The Wonder of It All: Faith, Creation, and Wisdom

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I have great faith in a seed.

Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders.

*Henry Thoreau*¹

The German-born British astronomer William Herschel (1738-1822) had sound advice for his son John, who was struggling to discern what to do with his life in Cambridge:

A clergyman . . . has time for the attainment of the more elegant branches of literature, for poetry, for music, for drawing, for natural history . . . for mathematics, for astronomy, for metaphysics, and for being an author upon any one subject in which . . . [he is] qualified to excel.²

There was a day when pastors had the time and opportunity to excel in the “more elegant branches” of study, including the scientific. (Note that no mention is made of theology!) It is hard to imagine that the ordained ministry was once considered a calling that allowed one to pursue other branches of learning, including the natural sciences. How strange that seems in our current cultural climate, which holds faith and science either at arm’s length or against each other’s throat.

Not so in the past. John Wesley himself found the study of science (a.k.a. “natural philosophy”) to be edifying for ministry. He chided young pastors with the following words:

Do I understand natural philosophy? If I have not gone deep therein, have I digested the general grounds of it? Have I mastered Gravesande, Keill, Sir Isaac Newton’s *Principia*, with his “Theory of Light and Colours”? . . . If I have not gone thus far, if I am such a novice still, what have I been about ever since I came from school?³

Such an admonishment seems to come from another world and time, for another world and time. Would that pastors today had the leisure to study the natural world, to understand something of God’s wondrous creation through the lens of science, let alone their own eyes! The only person I know who tried to do this while serving as pastor suffered a rather limited tenure in his first and only call to a congregation.⁴ (He also happens to be a contributor to this journal issue.)

Largely unrecognized by both the “new atheists” and today’s fundamentalists is the fact that many scientific discoveries of the past were made by persons of deep faith; they were driven by the desire to know the secrets of nature and, no less, the mind of God. Even Charles Darwin was considering the ministry as he boarded the *H.M.S. Beagle* to begin a journey that would point him in another vocational direction.

To state the obvious, continuing education for pastors today is largely devoted to church growth and conflict resolution, to lectionary preaching and crisis counseling. And for good reason. One would be hard pressed to find classes that taught evolutionary biology to pastors, or cosmology to Christian educators, or ecology to elders. Quantum mechanics for seminarians? How absurd! What have they to do with building up the body of Christ?

There was a time when leaders and teachers of the church were avidly keeping up with the latest scientific discovery...or making their own. Richard Holmes, in his magisterial work, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science*, documents the so-called second scientific revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in which the scientific method and the poetic imagination briefly converged. Here was a time when scientists reveled in poetry and spirituality, and poets were enamored with the discoveries of science. It was a time in which even pastors explored nature through the ever-sharpening lens of science. That age now seems irretrievably lost: fundamentalists, both religious and scientific, have monopolized the dialogue, effectively destroying it.

Lost in Wonder

It is worth noting that while leisure provided the means, it was not the driving force for theological inquiry of the natural world in that bygone era. It was wonder. In the famous hymn of Charles Wesley, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," the final verse concludes with the arresting phrase "lost in wonder, love, and praise." My guess is that Wesley saw "wonder, love, and praise" as an interconnected whole. Today, however, *losing* wonder seems more the norm, and with it love and praise. The discourse of wonder has become riddled with the rhetoric of adversity. In this age of culture wars, political incivility, racial and religious strife, economic malaise, not to mention the "the long emergency" that is now upon us,⁵ fear and fatigue have all but displaced love and wonder.

What constitutes a bona fide experience of wonder? Something that takes your breath away and at the same time compels you to cry out in joy: a mixture of fear and fascination. Such is its paradox: wonder instills a reverent, if not fearful, receptivity toward the world and God even as it quickens the *eros* of inquiry, a love of knowing God and the world.⁶ In the throes of wonder, epistemological barriers break down, and an awareness of deep connectedness emerges. Wonder, as certain ethicists have argued, is also fundamental to moral formation. Such is its power: wonder engenders wondering, which can lead to wisdom.

Postmodern philosopher Jerome Miller illustrates the phenomenology of wonder by describing the archetypal childhood experience of standing before a door that leads into a secret room. The child pauses while considering whether to flee or to turn the latch. In fear, the child turns back. In awe, the child is mesmerized, lingering at the door, frozen in contemplation. In wonder, the child ventures to reach out and gingerly grasp the latch to pass through the threshold and behold what lies on the other side.⁷ *Wonder*, in other words, has its *Wanderlust*. The movement from fear to enchantment, from awe to joy, marks wonder's journey toward the unknown, an unknown that ultimately attracts rather than repels. Wonder prompts an awareness

of worlds beyond one's own; it is an awakening of sorts. Theologically, wonder offers an intimation of holiness.⁸ "I'm a scientist," Barbara Kingsolver declares, "who thinks it wise to enter the doors of creation not with a lion tamer's whip and chair, but with the reverence humankind has traditionally summoned for entering places of worship: a temple, a mosque, or a cathedral. A sacred grove, as ancient as time."⁹

Karl Barth once said, "The miracle is not that there is a God. The miracle is that there is a world."¹⁰ God could have easily chosen not to create a world. Nowhere does the Bible say that God was in need of a world, that God was somehow lonely and created a world to assuage an acute case of divine solitude. Why God created a world is itself a mystery. The world itself is a wonder: it will always be more than what we make of it or know of it.¹¹ Marvelously "weird" is how physicist Brian Greene describes the world according to science.¹² Biologist Ursula Goodenough talks of the "sacred depths of nature."¹³ "Too wonderful" is what the biblical sage says about creation (Proverbs 30:18-19). The psalmist trembles in awe before the vastness of the universe (Psalm 8:3-4). What do they all have in common? I wonder. Though separated by over two and a half millennia, the authors of ancient Scripture and the scientists of today find themselves caught up in a world of abiding wonder, of mystery and awe. Howard Smith, from the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics and a practicing Jew, said this, "I'm religious not because I'm ignorant. I'm religious because I'm in awe."¹⁴ Awe or wonder. That, I believe, is what most strongly links science and faith.

Wonder is built into our very nature. The capacity to wonder may very well be "the hallmark of our species," according to Melvin Konner, bioanthropologist at Emory University.¹⁵ Perhaps, then, *Homo sapiens*, or the "wise human," is too self-congratulatory a classification for us. But there is no doubt that we are *Homo admirans* (the "wondering human"). Not only do we have x and y chromosomes to determine our genders, but we also have what could be called the "why chromosome" to determine our humanity, the capacity to marvel over the fact that something exists at all, rather than nothing. The wonder of it all prompts one—anyone—to wonder about it all. Wonder is what drives the best of science; it is also, I'm convinced, what brings out the best in faith. "Everyone is naturally born a scientist," admits astrobiologist Chris Impey.¹⁶ And we can no more deny that of our ancestors in the faith than we can deny that of ourselves. Together, the ancient cosmogonist of the book of Genesis and the modern cosmologist of the Big Bang, the biblical sage and the urbane biologist, form what I call a "cohort of wonder."

Sadly, the cohort is dissolving. Is science really hell-bent on eroding humanity's nobility and eliminating all sense of mystery? Not the science I know. Is religion simply an excuse to wallow in human pretension? Not the faith I know. What if invoking God was a way of acknowledging the wondrous intelligibility of creation? What if science informed and enabled persons of faith to become more trustworthy "stewards of God's mysteries" (1 Corinthians 4:1)? The faith I know does not keep believers on a leash to prevent them from broadening their awareness of the world. Barbara Brown Taylor puts it well: "[F]aith in an incarnational God will not allow us to ignore the physical world, nor any of its nuances."¹⁷ I would press this observation even further. Faith in an incarnational God calls us to know and honor the physical, fleshy world, whose "nuances" are its wondrous workings: its delicate balances and indomitable dynamics, its life-sustaining regularities and surprising anomalies, its

remarkable intelligibility and bewildering complexity, its order and its chaos. Such is the World made flesh, and faith in the Word made flesh acknowledges that the very forces that produced me also produced microbes, bees, and manatees. We are all linked together by the common thread of life, DNA, or as Genesis 2 puts it: the “dust of the ground,” the *adamah*. Whatever name you give it, the biologist’s dictum remains correct: “I link, therefore I am.” Science has shown just how wondrously interconnected all creation is. As much as we cannot ignore the incarnate God, we cannot dismiss the incarnate world revealed by science. Theologically, there is no other option: faith in such a God calls people of faith to understand and honor creation, the world that God has not only deemed “very good” (Genesis 1:31) but also saw fit to inhabit (John 1:10-14). In Christ the God in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28) has all to do with the world in which we live and move and have our being. The Word made flesh is intimately bound to the World made flesh. And that world—our world, God’s world—is a world of wonder.

Wonder and Wisdom

Wonder wears many faces. There is what philosopher Sam Keen calls the primal sense of wonder, which marvels at the fact that “the very existence of the world seems strange and miraculous, as if its very being were a triumph over nothingness.”¹⁸ But there is also the kind of wonder that arises from a particular encounter with something or someone that captivates our attention and stirs our imagination: a stand of giant redwoods, a baby’s first smile, the rosy-fingered dawn. Such wonders are not problems to be solved, but mysteries to be pondered and enjoyed. Such wonder does not elicit fear or terror, but joy and discernment; it is something to get lost in.

The great Catholic biblical scholar Roland Murphy was once asked of his favorite passage in the Bible. He was quick to draw from Proverbs, itself a book of wonder and wisdom.

Three things are too wonderful for me;
four I do not understand:
the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a snake on a rock,
the way of a ship on the high seas,
and the way of a man with a young woman.¹⁹ (30:18-19)

According to this numerical proverb, there is nothing like ships, snakes, and sex to prompt a sense of wonder. Certain things are wonderful, indeed “too wonderful,” the ancient sage admits, because they propel us headlong into the realm of the unknown, to the very limits of human understanding. And yet the experience of wonder also awakens within us the desire to know, to inquire and understand. To marvel at the “way of the eagle in the sky” and that of “the snake on a rock” awakens within us the desire to know more about the eagle (or vulture—same word in Hebrew) and the snake, their habits and habitats, their means of motion. The image may also prompt one to wonder what it is like to glide, nearly motionless, upon updrafts of warm air, scanning the landscape with near telescopic vision, or to slither silently upon the smooth surface of a rock under the warm sun.

Wonder is both an enlivening response to something new or unexpected and a

motivating force for ongoing inquiry. While wonder is a deeply felt emotion that involves “higher-order” cognitive activity, intimations of wonder can also be found in nonhuman species, particularly in primates, as evidenced in their curiosity, explorative behavior, and what appears to be contemplation before certain kinds of novelty, such as sunsets and, yes, snakes!²⁰ Wonder is what unites the empiricist and the “contemplator,” the scientist and the believer, children and adults.²¹ It may also prove to be a profound link to our evolutionary cousins.

As children, we were born into wonder. Rachel Carson, the author of *Silent Spring*, beautifully states,

A child’s world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood. If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength.²²

I submit that the crisis of creation—its abuse and degradation—stems in part from a crisis of wonder, of wonder about God’s good creation, of wonder about God in creation. We should be “lost in wonder,” as the hymn says, not losing wonder. Wonder, moreover, cultivates wisdom. It is the soil in which wisdom grows and flourishes.²³ Without wonder, wisdom withers; its journey is cut short.

It is high time to plant seeds of wonder in a climate that is far too polarized. It is high time that we, like the sages and psalmists of old, like the clergy of a time now lost, “go wild” and learn something about God’s creation in all its extravagant, intricate, brutal, wondrous beauty, its life-sustaining ways and its fragile resilience, its ecology as well as its ontology. Only then may the wonder of an incarnational faith be fully recovered. It is high time, in other words, that we find out what in the world God has gotten herself into. And it is also high time that we find out about the mess we have gotten ourselves into. It’s time to venture forth as trustworthy and responsible “stewards of God’s mysteries” (1 Corinthians 4:1-2), to reach out and turn the latch that opens the door into a world of wonder and awe, of joy and justice, of captivation and creation care, knowing that Christ stands on the other side, saying, “Behold! I stand at the door and knock; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me” (Revelation 3:20). Let the feast of wonder begin.

Notes

1 Henry David Thoreau, *The Dispersion of Seeds and Other Late Natural History Writings*, ed. Bradley P. Dean (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1993), xvii.

2 Quoted in Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How The Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 388.

3 Quoted in Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 51-52.

4 Christopher J. Preston, *Saving Creation: Nature and Faith in the Life of Holmes Rolston III* (San

Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2009), 55-85.

5 That is, a time plagued with mounting ecological stress. See James Howard Kunstler, *The Long Emergency: Surviving the Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005), esp. 147-234.

6 The felicitous phrase “eros of inquiry” comes from Jerome A. Miller, *In the Throe of Wonder: Intimations of the Sacred in a Post-Modern World* (New York: SUNY, 1992), 16 and *passim*.

7 Ibid., 33-36.

8 As Rudolf Otto famously described holiness as *mysterium tremendum*, which includes an element of fascination. *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey [New York: Oxford University Press, 1958], esp. 12-40.

9 Barbara Kingsolver, *Small Wonder: Essays* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 108.

10 Quoted in Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Nature, God, and Pulpit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 40.

11 The following discussion is drawn in part from William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4-7.

12 Brian R. Greene, *The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space, Time, and the Texture of Reality* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 11.

13 Ursula Goodenough, *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

14 Quoted in the conference “Re-Envisioning the Science and Religion Dialogue” (16 June 2010) of the Dialogue on Science, Ethics, and Religion (DoSER) of AAAS accessed at http://www.aaas.org/spp/dser/02_Events/Lectures/2010/welcome/welcome.shtml.

15 Melvin Konner, *The Tangled Wing: Biological Constraints on the Human Spirit* (2nd ed.; New York: Henry Holt, 2002), 488.

16 Chris Impey, *The Living Cosmos: Our Search for Life in the Universe* (New York: Random House, 2007), 10.

17 Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Luminous Web: Essays on Science and Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2000), 15.

18 Sam Keen, *Apology for Wonder* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 22.

19 Adapted from the NRSV, which lamentably translates the last two words as “girl” (Hebrew ‘*almah*).

20 See James B. Harrod, “Appendices for Chimpanzee Spirituality: A Concise Synthesis of the Literature,” posted December 26, 2009 at <http://www.originsnet.org/chimpspiritdatabase.pdf>, especially pp 8-9. See also the blog entry by Marc Bekoff, “Do Animals Have Spiritual Experiences? Yes, They Do,” *Psychology Today* (30 November, 2009) at <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/animal-emotions/200911/do-animals-have-spiritual-experiences-yes-they-do>. See also Jane Goodall, “Primate Spirituality,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. B. Taylor (New York: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005), 1303-1306.

21 Konner, *The Tangled Wing*, 486.

22 Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 54.

23 Ibid., 56.