

The "Ah" of Wonder

Let us consider the *mystery of wonder*.

We could begin a list – perhaps that would be fun?

We wonder at the ocean, its waves, its depths, its power. If we are very inclined to wonder we might linger over its smell or glorious varieties of its color – why is it blue here and green there?

Physics, of course, can answer that question for us, but it cannot answer for us this: Why does the blue of the ocean seem to us *beautiful*?

Maybe we wonder at the flora and fauna of creation – the sedums that survive the harshness of winter to return year after year in our gardens, or the grasses that cushion our walking and perfume the air when they are cut. Flowers burst forth in profusion in the springtime, but how often do we linger over the lilacs that border our walks? Do we pause to drink in their scent?

Novelist Alice Walker writes, "I think it [pisses] God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it. People think pleasing God is all God cares about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back."

Or perhaps the joy of falling in love? It is a simple thing to value what another does for us, or to assess the effects of lust on our behavior, but how often do we ponder the reality of falling in love?

When we feel it, it sweeps over us... time flies with the one we love, and drags in perpetuity for the love-sick swains awaiting, or so the poets tell us. But how can we measure the way love reportedly makes heroes out of cowards and fools out of the careful and reserved?

Of course, the mystery of wonder could easily be reduced to the practice of mindfulness. And to give mindfulness its due, there is a very great deal of power in intentionality – of knowing yourself, and observing your actions and surroundings. But mindfulness of the wonder of creation is mindfulness not centered on the self and what we see, but rather on the mysteries of God, and the mystery of wonder runs deeper than what we can observe and theorize.

The story is told of a young man, born into slavery in Missouri, stolen away from his mother by captors and taken off to Arkansas where he was bartered for a three-hundred-dollar race horse before he was finally allowed to return to his home in Missouri. But a keen intellect changed the course of his life from what he might have expected in those days. He entered high school, then university, graduate school followed at Iowa State where he finished in 1896.

When this man was asked about his thirst for knowledge, he answered, “When I was a young boy, I said to God, ‘Lord, tell me the mysteries of the universe.’”

But God said, “That mystery is reserved for me alone.”

So, the young man said, “Lord, then tell me the mystery of the peanut.”

Then God said, “Well, George, now that’s more nearly your size.”

And George Washington Carver went on to unfold the mysteries of the peanut. In his lab, he produced countless wonders – all born of the mystery of a humble legume.¹

To contemplate wonder, and the mystery of wonder, is to come face-to-face with our own finiteness.

That should be no surprise; we all know we are limited.

But to come face-to-face with wonder is to witness the creative power of God – and to be reminded of our place in God’s creation.

But it is more: To wonder is to join in with God in rejoicing at the overflowing of all that life hungers to abound for you and me.

Long before the Hubble telescope radioed back fantastical images of horsehead nebulas, and the birth of stars, and clouds and clouds of heavenly matter, before the Galileo probe revealed yet more complexities than we imagined of Jupiter,

The psalmist wrote,

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?*

The psalm opens with the celebration of God, and all that God has wrought before shifting to the celebration of humankind – the crowning achievement of God’s creative powers. All else is *commanded* into being, but the human, we know, instead is *crafted* by God’s own hands, filled with God’s own breath, and tasked with God’s own authority to have dominion over all the earth.

To be human is to be harnessed to creation by God’s own hand, and given the power to decide whether to cultivate or destroy.

But to be harnessed to creation is also to be *bound* by wonder.

Can it be accidental that the very creature that God put in charge over the others is the creature whom God bound with *wonder*?

¹ Victor M. Wilson, *Awe and Wonder*. St. John’s Presbyterian Church, Devon, PA 5/24/1988

My friend Betty McLaney, who was one of God's own saints if ever there was one, spent her whole life serving as Director of Christian Education in a number of churches. On the day that the Presbyterian Church had to vote whether to allow children to receive the Lord's Supper, she was pressed into service minutes before the motion came to the floor of the assembly.

(I hope that, with the open invitation to the table here at First Church you may marvel that there was ever a time when children weren't allowed to take communion, but it was the case until the early eighties.)

As Betty tells the story, friends of hers pressed in on her at the very last moment, educators all, and said to her, "You must speak for us, you have served for so long, with so many churches, they will listen to you."

And she responded, "I am not a theologian, I am an educator. I teach children. I prepare their Sunday School lessons, surely someone else could make the case better."

But they pressed her and pressed her, and finally she relented. She told me putting her hands in her pockets so no one would see them shaking as she spoke to a thousand ministers and elders, and she said simply,

"I am told that it is the wonder of the Lord's Supper that causes you to question if children should come to the table of Jesus Christ. I am told that the mysteries of the Eucharist are too great for a child to understand. But I ask you, who *more* than children, whose whole lives are filled with wonder, who can more fully entertain the mysteries of God?"

Who indeed? We run into the mystery of wonder every single day.

We slam into stunning moments, take-our-breath-away happenings from sunrise to sunset on into the twilight and the gift of sleep and dreams and awake to a new day – but how often do we savor the haunting, lingering smell of wet clover? Do we notice the earthy, fertile aroma of leaves rustling on the ground before the rain plasters them to the pavement?

How often are we captured with the "*ah*" of wonder?

In a sermon by the same title, the late Louis Patrick wrote, "So often this "*ah*" of wonder escapes us. We look at everyday life, our own life or the life of the world, but instead of the "*ah*" of wonder, it's the "*blah*" of what we know and what we somehow think we understand. We see through everything we want to see. Every question has an answer. You come to the "*blah*" of class after class after class, all questions with answers. The "*blah*" of a world where we are moved around by virtue of digits assigned to us by computers, known by numerals instead of names. The "*blah*" of plastic replacing wood, powdered stuff replacing [Bess's] milk, soap operas instead of real life. Eventually we do indeed see what is in everything until there is nothing left to see, and we look through the slits of our eyes knowingly like some downstairs maid. Until all the

prophet can say to the likes of us is, 'See, you blind! Listen, you deaf! to that wonder that is deep down in the everyday things.'"²

Lest we wax too poetical over the created order of God, let us remember that nature has the power to thrash and destroy, to inflict grievous wounds and to unleash terrible suffering. To make a god out of the natural world is to idolize a fickle master.

And yet the God of creation – the God who makes creation – leaves fingerprints all over the universe...

There is no need to decode them or to group them into a system of belief; it is sufficient to find within us the capacity to pause long enough to say, "The Lord is in this place."

The Lord is in this place – the place where we worship.

The Lord is in this place – the breakfast room, with the computer open to a virtual world.

The Lord is in this place – the underpasses where people huddle out of the rain and store meager belongings.

The Lord is in this place – where grit and grime obscure glory... where boring and ordinary reign, where minutes are taken and hours are wasted.

The *Lord* is in this place... to be confronted with the miracle of life is to be invited to open oneself to the knowledge that God is in even the hurting places, however that hurt comes: war and sometimes random violence, or perhaps sharp words and inferences, an arched brow, the casually forgotten invitation.

The mystery of wonder invites us to disturb our own peace with awareness, and to pacify our turmoil with constancy.

The mystery of wonder is the paradox of God-given intelligence that would deny the giver until all other possibilities have been exhausted.

The mystery of wonder is the paradox that while words can cut and tear down, words can also heal and restore. The mystery of wonder is the grace of God.

In Walt Whitman's words,

*When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,*

² H. Louis Patrick, *The "Ah" of Wonder* in Sermons from Duke Chapel: Voices from "A Great Towering Church", Will Willimon, ed. (Duke University Press, Durham, 2005) p236

*In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.*³

Perhaps, if just for a moment, we slow down from the rush to return to *normal*, and – breathe in, breathe out, *in, out...*

Perhaps, if we silence every voice *around* us – if we turn off the ringers, and the buzzers and the television and radio,

Perhaps if we silence every voice *within* us but the voice of the one who breathes our life in and out, in and out,

Perhaps in the stillness of our being, we might look at the heavens and say, *O Lord, our Lord!
How majestic is your name in all the earth!*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

³ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45479/when-i-heard-the-learned-astronomer>