



“And the Wonder Grew”

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For as long as I can remember, I have sought to be successful. Even in the earliest years of school, I wanted to be first in my class, whether or not I actually learned anything. As an adult, I have sometimes cherished the prestige of a position more than I have been satisfied by the work. When playing a game, I play to win – and when I repeatedly lose at a particular game, I lose my enthusiasm for it and stop playing. (One needs only ask my wife sometime about Scrabble™.) Now when kept in check, the desire for success is hardly a shortcoming, but when the quest for success – we might say *mere* success – becomes an all-consuming passion, then it amounts to a form of personal idolatry. True success is the natural consequence of a job well done, a commitment honored, an endeavor brought to fruition – in short, a life lived with personal integrity. Success is an outcome, a consequence – but as a goal, in and of itself, the quest for success is rather shallow.

For those of us who are distracted by the need to be successful, we can take some comfort in knowing that we are not alone. Like other human institutions, churches are full of people who are driven by the desire to be successful, whether at work, in their personal lives, or even at church itself. Perhaps *you* are someone who nurtures such ambition. At the same time, though, it is apparent that even those who are driven to achieve the outward signs of success come to church looking for “something more.” Men and women discover that, even with the accumulation of wealth and the achievement of fame, our appetites are never fully satisfied. Public acclaim and personal comfort never quite mask the sense that there is “something more” which somehow eludes us.

In the preface to his book of Yiddish poetry, Abraham Joshua Heschel aptly summarized his own search for the holy when he wrote, “I did not ask for success, I asked for wonder; and you gave it to me.”¹ How different our lives might be if, in place of success, we too asked for wonder!

Now I generally advise against consulting dictionaries as a method to uncover the meaning of a word, since dictionaries are notoriously conventional, literal and shallow.

But in the case of wonder, my dictionary turned out to offer ... well ... a wonderful definition. It describes 'wonder' first of all as a "miracle, prodigy, strange or remarkable thing or specimen or performance or event." It goes on to say that wonder is also an "emotion excited by what surpasses expectation or experience or seems inexplicable, surprise mingled with admiration or curiosity or bewilderment." When, like Abraham Joshua Heschel, we "ask for wonder," we long for it in both senses of the word – we want to see firsthand the miraculous and the remarkable, and we hunger to experience that feeling of excitement when life surpasses our expectations.

In more traditional religions, this sense of wonder may derive from the supernatural or a magical understanding of the miraculous. In our naturalistic faith, the sense of wonder is found in the everyday and commonplace. Unitarian Universalists speak of the "direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life." This transcending mystery and wonder is experienced in many ways – when we gaze upon a beautiful vista, when we are caressed by the excited touch of a lover, when our ears tune in to the songs of the birds or the melodious strains of a violin, when the poems of the heart tumble from our lips, or when the golden silence of creation surrounds us in meditation or prayer.

An openness to wonder is something that seems to come more easily to children than to adults. Perhaps we adults are so busy seeking to understand and explain the world that we are unable simply to experience it. So wonder, in its pristine form, would seem to be the special province of children. In *The Sense of Wonder*, Rachel Carson opined, "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."²

I cannot help but think back to my own childhood and recall the numerous occasions when, with my father and grandfather – sometimes with both – I discovered the world of nature. In some ways, the memories of walks with my grandfather are more vivid, if only because they were less frequent. Grandpa's farm stretched down to the ocean, where together we would wander along the tidal flats, watching the tiny crabs along the water's edge and looking for the telltale signs of clams hidden beneath the sand. The first time I ever saw a killer whale was not at an aquarium, but just off Lighthouse Point. Their common name – *killer* whales – frightened me, until Grandpa coaxed me to turn around and I saw one of these gentle creatures leap gracefully out of the water. On other occasions, the two of us would wander out to Lily Point, past the "no trespassing" signs at the end of the road. There the sandy cliff rises high above the

ocean, where gulls and eagles alike soar above the wooden pilings – all that remains of the old cannery wharf – stretching out into Boundary Bay. The towering trees and the deer that took their refuge among them, the crashing waves and the rocks that glistened beneath them, the abundant life of the tidal flats and the gentle wisdom of my grandfather – all alike instilled in me a sense of awe and wonder. And the wonder grew.

All of these memories and countless more came flooding back to me just a few years ago when I accompanied my daughters to Cattle Point, near Victoria. Although we were some forty miles southwest of Grandpa's farm at Point Roberts, across the Strait of Georgia, the familiar sight of Mount Baker hovered on the eastern horizon. I was hesitant at first, but Cindy took the girls out onto the rocks and I couldn't help but follow along. The salt air and the gentle breeze, the cool water and tidal pools teeming with life – it all conspired to overwhelm me. So familiar and yet so strange, I found myself gripped by the wonder I knew as a boy – but this time, I was cast in an unfamiliar role. Rachel Carson maintains that, "If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder ... he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in."³ Lifting a line out of its biblical context, we might further say that if many adults are to experience that exciting rediscovery, then "a child shall lead them."

Science and technology sometimes erode our childlike sense of awe, even though there is no inherent conflict between science and wonder. While I would never seek to stand in the way of the march of science, a part of me quietly rebels against the disenchantment of nature that has accompanied our expanding frontiers of knowledge. Simply put, the *magic* of a trick is often lost when it is explained. Though it is not true that ignorance is bliss, I take great delight in those scientific discoveries and explanations that raise more questions than they solve! My sentiment echoes that of Harry Emerson Fosdick, who once remarked, "I would rather live in a world where my life is surrounded by mystery than live in a world so small that my mind could comprehend it." Yet, even at the risk of disenchantment, I have an insatiable appetite to know and understand.

Of course, at its roots, the scientific spirit springs forth from the curiosity that wonder evokes. Just think, for a moment, of the late Carl Sagan ... or Jane Goodall and Stephen Jay Gould, for that matter. Are not scientists such as these intoxicated with a sense of wonder? As Sagan said with such eloquence and enthusiasm at the beginning of *Cosmos*, "our species is young and curious and brave and shows much promise. In the last few millenia we have made the most astonishing and unexpected discoveries about the Cosmos and our place within it, explorations that are exhilarating to consider. They remind us that humans have evolved to wonder, that understanding is a joy, that

knowledge is prerequisite to survival.”⁴

Whether by accident or design, it seems true that we have evolved to wonder and it is equally true that wonder lies at the heart of both science and religion. As Thomas Carlyle once observed, “wonder is the basis of worship.” Even if you wish to be successful in your life, you probably don’t arrive at church on Sunday morning seeking just another opportunity or outlet for success. Even if you wish to acquire all of the material comforts available in our affluent society, I doubt that the quest for material comfort has motivated your presence here this morning. Even if you long to be at “the head of the class,” it is not academic distinctions that lure you to learn and discover, reflect and philosophize as a part of this community of worship. I would imagine that, whether you are conscious of it or not, you have come here – in some measure, at least – to exercise your sense of wonder, the same quality of wonder you first knew as a child.

And it seems to me that doing so is redemptive. The truly horrific events of last month have shown us that a relatively small group of people can unleash almost unimaginable terror and destruction, yet they cannot destroy the wonder that lies at the heart of our earthly existence. Let us believe, even if we should be proven wrong, that a faith steeped in wonder, which moves us to reverence, can unleash a wave of justice tempered by love, liberty moderated by compassion, and a respect for human worth and dignity that moves us all towards human decency.

The spiritual task before us today, and always, is to recall for ourselves a childlike sense of wonder without succumbing to the merely childish or infantile. We know how religion has often served the latter rather than the former. But to the extent that our worship can nurture in people that childlike sense of wonder, encourage our curiosity, and motivate us to ceaseless exploration, then the church will be – dare I say it? – successful in its mission. This will not be *mere* success – success as a goal – but rather *profound* success, that success which is a consequence of our quest for knowledge and understanding and authenticity. It will not be the kind of success we might ask for, or some imagine that we deserve, but rather the quality of success that comes as an unmerited gift to those who stand in awe before the unfathomable majesty of creation.

There is a poignant scene in Thornton Wilder’s play, *Our Town*, in which the central character, Emily, returns to her hometown, nine years after her death, to look upon a scene from her childhood. As she readies herself to return to her resting place, she turns for one last look at the people and place she knew as a child. “Good-by,” she says, “Good-by, world. Good-by, Grovers Corners ... Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking ... and Mama’s sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths ... and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you’re too wonderful for anyone to realize you.” She looks toward the narrator and asks through her tears, “Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? – every, every minute?” The

narrator nods, “No,” then, pausing briefly says, “The saints and poets, maybe – they do some.” Even across the threshold of death, Emily retains her childlike sense of wonder. “Oh, earth,” we say with her, “you’re too wonderful ...”⁵

If we open our hearts and minds to allow wonder to take hold of us, rekindling our curiosity and reminding us that the earth is precious – that *we* are precious – then we just might come to realize that whatever evidence there may sometimes be to the contrary, this is, as Louis Armstrong used to sing, a wonderful world ... and that we are a part of the wonder. Then we will be numbered among the saints and the poets, realizing life while we live it – each and every moment. So let us not ask for success, let us ask for wonder. And may our wonder forever grow.



First Reading: “On Wonder” by Samuel McChord Crothers⁶

Say if you will that you are a machine, very well you are a machine -- a machine that thinks, a machine that plans, a machine that loves, a machine that is not satisfied with itself but goes on inventing all sorts of things and creating all sorts of things. That thinking, loving, hoping machine is just as wonderful as if you called it a soul. I do not see that it makes any difference at all what you call it.

A [person] may say, I believe in God. Another [person] may say, I do not believe in God. That does not make any difference to me as I look out upon the world. I am not wondering at your definition; I am simply facing a reality which I cannot easily pass by, and after all your denials it is just where it was before, made all the more wonderful by the questionings which have come ...

That is the way religious [people] in all ages, just because they were religious, have felt, not about what they were told, but about what they experienced in their own lives, in the things they saw, in their sorrows, in their distresses, in their hopes. They saw something that made them wonder; and the wonder grew ...

Second Reading: “Awe” by Abraham Joshua Heschel⁷

Awe is an intuition for the dignity of all things, a realization that things not only are what they are but also stand, however remotely, for something supreme.

Awe is a sense for the transcendence, for the reference everywhere to mystery beyond all things. It enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, ... to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal. What we cannot comprehend by analysis, we become aware of in awe.

References

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology*, ed. Samuel H. Dresner (New York: Crossroad, 1995), vii.

² Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* (1965), quoted in *The New Beacon Book of Quotations By Women*, ed. Rosalie Maggio (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 756.

³ Carson, *op. cit.*

⁴ Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), 4.

⁵ Thornton Wilder, *Our Town* (1938), Act III.

⁶ Samuel McChord Crothers, quoted in *A Family Chronicle* by Louise Bronson Crothers (Concord, New Hampshire: Rumford Press, 1966), 245-246.

⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder*, 3.