

Lost in Wonder

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Introduction

In Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, one of the characters, Horatio, sees a ghost and doesn't know what to make of it. He is shaken, because he did not believe in ghosts. Hamlet, who does, says to him, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy." (*Hamlet* Act I, scene 5). Meaning that Horatio's mind was not yet open to the dimension beyond rational philosophy.

Besides ghosts and angels and other spirits, there are many many things in heaven and earth that we find baffling, inexplicable, utterly mysterious. We call these things mysteries, and we may try to solve them at first. If we don't succeed, we may just file them away as things we do not yet understand, without ceasing to wonder about them. There are mysteries that we wonder about and there are mysteries that we wonder at, in the sense of being struck with amazement at what our senses are telling us.

In these reflections we want to investigate the phenomenon of wonder. Wonder is an attitude, a stance, of the human spirit that is close to the practice of deep prayer, especially contemplative prayer. A monastery is meant to foster in us our capacity for wonder. I am using wonder in the sense of "an openness to the mystery-dimension of life." That will be our working definition for these reflections. To elaborate, wonder opens our minds and hearts so that we try to take in the bigger picture, maybe a whole range of reality that we never knew was there, whether the reality be on the natural level or a supernatural level. Yet, however much we try, we never fully take in this mystery before us, never fully comprehend it. As Hispanic American writer Anaïs Nin (1903–77) says, "There is always more mystery." I think the reason she can say that is that the ultimate horizon of mystery is God who is infinite.

Life in the monastery is meant to liberate us from our short-sighted pursuits and preoccupations for a life of contemplative wonder and openness to the manifestation of God in whatever form God chooses to appear in our life, be it in the form a ghost, as happened to Horatio and Hamlet, or in the form of a slice of warm fresh-baked bread, or in the form of a round piece of sacred host placed in my open hand. Religion without wonder, life in a monastery without wonder, is flat, lusterless, uninspired, spiritless, mere drudgery, mere endurance. Add the presence of wonder, and monastic life is a continual encounter with God in whatever form God may appear.

Usually we do not glimpse God until he has disappeared and left us delighted and grateful, saying to ourselves “How wonderful.” Leaving us full of wonder. “Were not our hearts burning within us?” (Lk 24:32) A permanent and incurable sense of wonder keeps us alert to God’s presence hidden in Scripture, in nature, in ourselves and in one another, in the daily routine and in unexpected happenings. Contemplation of God is linked with the ability to wonder and to be surprised. If I am so much in control of my life that nothing ever surprises me, then I may never encounter God, who is full of surprises, inasmuch as God is infinite, totally unlimited. Pope Francis: “Be ready for the surprises of a merciful God.”

Some scientists who are genuinely dedicated to the pursuit of truth in their particular field always retain their ability to be surprised. They have theories, but they do not let their theories blind them to the unexpected, to the phenomena that their theories do not account for. They sense a larger harmony within the universe, an overarching all embracing order made up by all the individual parts interacting together. Physicist Ken Wilber says: “The great epoch-making discoveries in the history of science (think for example of that on universal gravitation) have been like sudden lightning flashes making us perceive in one single glance a harmony up till then unsuspected, and it is to have, from time to time, the divine joy of discovering such harmonies that pure science works without sparing its toil or seeking for profit” (*Quantum Questions*, Boston: Shambhala, 1985, 117). These scientists stand in wonder before the mystery of the universe; they are enthusiastic about nature and about their work to lift the veil and gaze directly upon the mystery. For them their work is a religious action, almost a liturgical action of worship. In the monastery we should not be strangers to this kind of religious wonder. The German poet-scientist Johann Goethe (1749–1832) once said that the highest achievement to which the human mind can attain is an attitude of wonder before the elemental phenomena of nature.”

1) Philosophers of Wonder.

We begin our reflections with the philosophers. Human beings have the power of asking questions. Philosophers always ask “why?” They keep asking until they trace the answer back to the ultimate cause. Theologians usually ask “what?” “What is God?” “What is the Incarnation?” Scientists ask “How?” “How in the world?” They are not satisfied until they discover

how everything works. Poets deal with the question “What if?” It’s a question that releases the powers of the imagination. Poets speak in the language of imagination, emotion, description, fantasy.

Albert Einstein was not only a world-class physicist but also a philosopher. He said: “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed.” Einstein was a mathematician who lived in a world of beauty, the beauty of spaces, shapes, movement, time, numbers.

A Dutch philosopher and writer, Cornelis Verhoeven (1928–2001), *Philosophy of Wonder*, analyzes what happens in the experience of wondering. First we are confronted with something “wonderful,” that makes us pause momentarily, before we decide whether we are going to be afraid or delighted or whatever. That moment of pause is the moment of wonder.

Before we consider Verhoeven’s analysis, it might be helpful to give an example. I think we have a good example from the Asian journey of Thomas Merton in 1968 when he visited a place called Polonnaruwa in Ceylon. It was just a week before his accidental death by electrocution. Someone took him to see the giant-size stone carved statues of Buddhist deities in a remote valley near a cave. Merton describes it in his journal. “Then the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing, the peace I was knocked over with a rush of relief and thankfulness at the *obvious* clarity of the figures, the clarity and fluidity of shape and line, the design of the monumental bodies composed into the rock shape and landscape, figure, rock and tree. . . . Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves became evident and obvious. . . . The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no ‘mystery.’ All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. . . . I don’t know when in my life I have ever

had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination.” (*Asian Journal*, 233–35)

Verhoeven has an analysis of wonder-experiences in general, not Merton at Polonnaruwa, but we can apply it to Merton. Verhoeven describes the stages thus: “1) An unexpected bit of reality interrupts me and breaks through into my habitual, familiar, matter-of-fact experience. Reality lifts its veil to give me just a peek, but what I glimpse shatters my taken-for-granted world. I can never take it for granted again because everything is so different now from what I thought it was. Unexpectedly there is the mysterious and unfamiliar in the midst of the familiar. A moment of ambiguity when I am faced with the new and unexperienced. Reality is inviting me to a fuller participation in itself, to an appreciation of its deeper meaning and significance. 2) Next there’s a moment when we pause to grope for what attitude we should take with regard to this new vision—that’s the moment of wonder, just before we either become delighted, fearful, dismayed, angry, or whatever.”

The moment of wonder is a temporary period of suspension when everything has suddenly become different and *more than* it was a moment ago. It takes us a moment to get in touch with the *more than*. Usually after a moment or two we come up with the proper reaction or the correct label for this unfamiliar reality, and then everything is restored to orderly, familiar life again. The usual resolution of our wondering is to put our world back together, back to normal. However, in the case of some experiences, called peak experiences, it may take a longer time to come back to normal.

So the wonderful is the thing that really grabs me, gives me pause, stops me as I go strolling along, perhaps takes my breath away or makes me gasp. Wonderful things do not arouse the same degree of wonder in every observer. One fellow may be standing there mouth agape, breathless with awe, while the fellow next to him may say, “Come on, let’s go, we can’t stand here all day.” The reaction depends on a person’s past experience, background, temperament, openness, etc. I cannot force myself or anyone else to feel wonder; wonder has to burst upon or out of me. It is an experience that is out of my hands. We can, however, try to broaden our vision of life in a contemplative way that sees deeper into and beyond

events, persons, things. Wonder is openness to the mystery-dimension of life. To neglect the mystery dimension of life diminishes me and narrows my world to a preoccupation with filling my immediate needs and wants.

2) Poets of Wonder.

By this title I mean poets who describe or evoke their own feeling of wonder or evoke the reality that aroused their wonder. There are many such poets, and I include also writers who have written maxims about wonder. Such as the anonymous one, "Those who wonder seldom blunder; those who blunder seldom wonder."

a) *Wisdom begins in wonder.*

- Socrates

b) *Mystery creates wonder, and wonder is the basis of man's desire to understand.*

- Neil Armstrong

c) *Never say there is nothing beautiful in the world anymore.*

There is always something to make you wonder in the shape of a tree, the trembling of a leaf.

- Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965)

d) *Yosemite Valley, to me, is always a sunrise,*

a glitter of green and golden wonder in a vast edifice of stone and space.

- Ansel Adams

e) *They say that every snowflake is different.*

If that were true, how could the world go on? How could we ever get up off our knees? How could we ever recover from the wonder of it?

- Jeanette Winterson (1959, British writer)

f) *Ordinary men live among marvels and feel no wonder, grow familiar with objects and learn nothing new about them.*

- George Henry Lewes (1817–78 British writer)

g) *Wonder is involuntary praise.*

- Edward Young (1681–1765, British poet)

h) Maya Angelou,

"People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

There are poets who might be called "wonder poets," whose poems spring from a sense of wonder and evoke that feeling in the reader.

For example, poets like:

—Gerard Manley Hopkins (poems are difficult)

—Mary Oliver, born 1935, winner of a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and the National Book Award who writes frequently about nature and animals. Here is one of her poems:

Wild Geese

You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees

for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,

over the prairies and the deep trees,

the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,

the world offers itself to your imagination,

calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting

over and over announcing your place

in the family of things.

from *Dream Work* by Mary Oliver

published by Atlantic Monthly Press

—Gary Snyder, born 1930, Pulitzer Prize winner, in the 50s was a poet in the Beat Generation. [Beat Generation=drop outs from society who advocated Zen, jazz, drugs, and sex.] Snyder also draws on nature and the environment for inspiration but also on metaphysical truth. For example:

RIPRAP

Lay down these words
Before your mind like rocks.
placed solid, by hands
In choice of place, set
Before the body of the mind
in space and time:
Solidity of bark, leaf, or wall
riprap of things:
Cobble of milky way, [lumps thrown together]
straying planets,
These poems, people,
lost ponies with
Dragging saddles--
and rocky sure-foot trails.
The worlds like an endless
four-dimensional
Game of Go.
Ants and pebbles
In the thin loam, each rock a word
a creek-washed stone
Granite: ingrained
with torment of fire and weight
Crystal and sediment linked hot
all change, in thoughts,
As well as things.

3) Wellsprings of Wonder

The psalmist is full of wonder at two created things [moon and stars; the human person] :

“How great is your name, O Lord our God, through all the earth! Your majesty is praised above the heavens . . . When I see the heavens, the work of your hands, the moon and the stars which you arranged, what is man that you should keep him in mind, mortal man that you care for him” (Ps 8:1–4).

In this section we will consider some of the things that evoke wonder, beginning with aspects of the physical universe around us—“the moon and the stars”—and then considering the reality of our own self, the human person, a composite of matter and spirit—“what is man that you should keep him in mind?” We can travel far and wide in order to be amazed at the seven wonders of the world, but we do not need to travel far, because our own being can be a source of wonder to ourselves. G.K. Chesterton has said, “The world will never starve from want of wonders but only from the lack of wonder.” (1974–1936 from *Tremendous Trifles*)

a) Wonders of the physical universe

What were those seven wonders of the ancient world? The list was compiled by the Greeks, and several of the wonders are products of Greek engineering. The seven are:

Great Pyramid of Giza, Hanging Gardens of Babylon, Temple of Artemis at Ephesus, Statue of Zeus at Olympia, Mausoleum at Halicarnassus (also known as the Mausoleum of Mausolus), Colossus of Rhodes, and the Lighthouse of Alexandria.

Since only one of these ancient wonders still exists [which one?], we cannot go and wonder at them. The list has been updated from time to time. “On July 7, 2007 (7-7-07) an organization announced a ‘new’ set of the Seven Wonders of the World based on online voting from around the world . . .

Chichen Itza, Mexico - Mayan City

Christ Redeemer, Brazil - Large Statue

[The Great Wall, China](#)

Machu Picchu, Peru

Petra, Jordan - Ancient City carved out of red sandstone

The Roman Colosseum, Italy

The Taj Mahal, India”

(<http://geography.about.com/od/lists/a/sevenwonders.htm>) You don't have to agree with the list. They are all World Heritage Sites, probably, but they are all human constructs. They are wonderful, but nature herself provides us with many more examples.

Nature is an abundant source of wonder because we can never fully match or master nature, God's handiwork. For example, let us say that I am walking down the road on a spring morning and on the side of the road I notice a newly opened wildflower that I have never seen before and cannot identify. It catches my attention. I stop and admire it for a moment. Am I content to simply admire and stay in that moment a little longer? Or do I stop another brother passing by, point it out to him and ask him what kind of flower it is. He tells me the name. It's a bluebell. I respond, "Oh, is that what it is." As soon as I know its name, I begin walking away, until something else catches my attention, if it does. If I had had more of the attitude of wonder, I might have been content to stand in admiration a little longer and maybe not even seek to know its name. Wondering at this flower, I would notice everything about it that I could, observing and delighting in its color, shape and texture, its fragrance and softness, its total uniqueness. This flower could open up for me at that moment the mystery of beauty, the mystery of growing things and of life. I could let myself be caught up on it because the total reality of the little flower—its totality—connects with the whole universe.

It may be helpful occasionally to go for a "wonder walk"— not a "power walk," but a reflective stroll with all your senses open: eyes, ears, nose, touch. A Wonder Walk could be your experiential entrance into the realm of wonder and the wonderful. Monasteries are often located in scenic places, because the beauty of nature can lead to contemplative wonder. Unless we see the beauty so often that we begin to take it for granted, until we no longer see it as wonderful. We can grow accustomed to almost

everything until it no longer registers on our senses as it did the first time. Someone quotes the answer of a monk of New Camaldoli [Aelred Squire] when he was asked whether he could see the ocean from his cell. “No; but there’s a place in church where we have a good view. When I was first there I used to look all the time at the ocean. Now [six years later], I’m so busy I rarely see it. [I know] It’s always there.” [quoted from Susman–Goode, *Walking* 365]

Someone else describes his Wonder Walk in the woods after a snowfall that left every twig and branch clothed with white, a winter wonderland. He writes: “It is beauty so great and complex that the imagination is stilled into an aching hush. There is the same trouble in the soul as before the starry hosts of a winter night.” [This may be found in *Walking* 365]

The notion of hush, of silence, comes back in the next example, a lengthy one, by a woman who describes going to Alaska, near Juneau, to see one of the largest inland glaciers, called the Mendenhall. The glacier had formed in between two mountains, a slowly moving river of ice. There was a lake below it, Mendenhall Lake, fed by the melting glacier.

This lady was hoping to see a chunk of the glacier break off and fall into the lake, an event called “calving.” She writes:

“We waited and watched quietly, expectantly. Glaciers are known to calf or break off very irregularly. Sometimes small pieces break off and drop quietly to the lake creating a small splash and a ripple. Other times pieces as high as three-story buildings crash to the water causing waves that rock the lake violently. Most days go by in silence and stillness.

“You must watch carefully in order to witness the drama of a glacier. We waited quietly, reverently, as if the sacred act could not take place amid noise. The more I watched the glacier the more I came to love it. I stopped looking for cracks and signs of movement. I stopped wishing for ‘it’ to happen. [Note how her focus broadens until it takes in the glacier and all that surrounds it.]

“I looked at the deep blue ice which had only recently been exposed to air and light. I watched the lake which was still being created by the ice rivers . . . I saw the exposed ice-carved rocks. The rough and ragged mountain

edges surrounding the glacier and lake showed the power and force of glacial ice. I noticed the different types of vegetation upon these rocks. . . .

“I listened to the birds flying overhead. They waited for the calving too. The great splash will bring edible living organisms to the surface. And I watched the glacier, in its beauty, its greatness, its power, and in the effect that it had had on all life surrounding it.

“Suddenly a thundering roar broke the silence and a twenty-foot tower of ice crashed into the water below. The entire lake moved in waves back and forth. Birds came from every direction. It lasted a magnificent second. It would not be repeated and it had not been recorded, but it had happened. No one dared break the silence and no one could leave. [prolonged moment of wonder]

“Even after the memory of the great glacier calving before me had faded I retained within me a sense of awe and oneness with all of creation. In its majesty the glacier called to us, drawing us to know and love it. It challenged us. . . . We had come to see the spectacular—not the simple beauty of a slowly flowing glacier.

“Some people witness the glacier in the fullness of its power, but it is the glacier we must love—not just its dramatic displays. We often go to God expecting the dramatic and the rare, only to find ourselves falling in love with the quiet and the gentle and the stillness.

“I left the glacier and Juneau with a sense of sadness. Did I have to travel over two thousand miles to experience the quiet and the drama of earth? . . . Once home, I noticed the spider web which had been spun in my camellia bush. A dandelion had broken through my sidewalk and flaunted its bright yellow flower. The bird nesting in the juniper bush now displayed five hungry mouths waiting for their mother.

“Perhaps not as spectacular as a falling glacier, but just as powerful, just as dramatic, just as much a sign of God’s activity. If I had watched and waited as intently at the camellia, the sidewalk and the juniper bush as I had at the Mendenhall, I might not have had to travel two thousand miles to fall in love.” [Renee Duffey, “Glaciers and Dandelions: Waiting for an Epiphany,” *Desert Call* 24.4 (Winter, 1989) 25–26] It’s a story about common things,

not just spectacular things, can evoke wonder if we pay attention and are open. Wonder is openness to the mystery dimension of life.

The next account is brief and takes place in the Canyonlands and Arches national parks in southern Utah. Sr. Arles Silbernack, OSB writes of visiting those places: “I am neither an artist nor a photographer, but am grateful to be able to enjoy and capture the quiet, the beauty and the immensity of this creative silence of nature. One can hear God’s love and beauty pouring forth in His creative silence of the vast red rock formations. Words inadequately describe this beauty.” {Newsletter, Mount Benedict Priory, June, 1989, p. 3] Here again there is an emphasis on silence in which one “can hear God’s love pouring forth.”

To add my personal experience of a powerful moment of wonder, I still remember the first time I visited the Grand Canyon, south rim around 1976. I had seen pictures of it, but these were no preparation for the overpowering experience of being there, walking slowly, with three others, from the parking lot toward the unfenced rim of the canyon, seeing the solid earth end in a sudden void almost a mile deep and ten miles across, stretching further than I could see to right and left. After an involuntary gasp at the vastness of the canyon, I was struck by the stillness of the whole panorama. No one in our group had much to say, because as soon as we began to speak, it seemed as if our words were swallowed up by the enormous chasm before us. The proper response was not words but silence. I felt dumb and dwarfed in the presence of something so immense, so primordial. I felt the same reverence I feel in a sacred place at a sacred moment, as in a church during Mass. The Grand Canyon evokes that sort of reverence, even awe. It is a place of tremendous majesty. To throw beer cans over the rim, as some do, seems more than littering, it seems like a desecration.

One of the most respected Catholic voices in the ecological movement is a Paulist priest, Fr Thomas Berry (+ 2009). He called himself an “eco-theologian.” In his book *The Dream of the Earth* (SF: Sierra Club,

1988, p 198) he evokes wonder at the whole material universe when he writes:

“. . . we stand in awe at the stars splashed in such prodigal display across the heavens, at the earth in its shaping of the seas and the continents, at the great hydrological cycles that lift such vast quantities of water up from the seas and rain them down over the land to nourish meadows and the forests and to refresh the animals as the waters flow down through the valleys and back again to the seas. We marvel, too, at the millionfold sequence of living forms, from the plankton in the sea and the bacteria in the soil to the larger lifeforms that swim through the oceans and grow up from the soil and move over the land.” Sounds a bit like Psalm 104, the creation psalm.

<http://www.flixxy.com/hubble-ultra-deep-field-3d.htm>compos

B. 2 The Wonder of Being Human

The Psalm verse for this section is Ps 139:14 “I thank you for the wonder of my being, for the wonders of all your creation.” The ancient psalmist did not know the intricacies of the many interconnected systems in the human body—the circulatory system, the nervous system, the digestive system, and so on— but the psalmist could wonder at what he observed about his own body. How wounds healed, for example, or how sleep takes away our consciousness and then restores us with fresh energy. Women can be full of wonder at the mystery of pregnancy and childbirth.

And both parents can wonder at the mystery of the new human life that they together have brought into the world and how miraculously it grows up in its own distinct, individual way. A contemporary novelist, John Updike, describes this parental feeling of wonder, mixed with respect:

“Of course I used to worry . . . but now I see that the children we have are just miracles like any other, like geysers or glass skyscrapers or mountains or maple trees in fall in Vermont, and that we have nothing to do with creating them—our job is to stand and

wonder. Our job is to marvel and love.” (S, New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1988, p 19; fictional story of Sarah P Worth)

There are many examples we could cite about the wonders of the human body, but we will limit ourselves to looking at just one, namely, the eye. Eyesight is generally considered the most valuable of the senses.

[from here, quoting Charles Cummings, *The Mystery of the Ordinary*, New York: Harper & Row, 1982, p 22–23]

“The human eye is a highly specialized organ with millions of light-sensitive neural cells—rods and cones—in its retina. Incoming light waves re-focused by the pliable lens to fall on the retina, which is an extension of the brain via the optic nerve. Like the image projected on film by a camera lens the image that falls on the retina of the eye is upside down and needs to be reversed in the interpretive processing it receives in the brain. Like the camera image also the retinal image is two-dimensional and needs to be given a depth dimension by brain processes that combine images from both eyes and utilize other data as well.

The retinal rods and cones are the light receptors of the eye. The cones, about seven million in number, are concentrated in an area called the fovea and are specialized to absorb either blue or green or yellow. Working in combination, the cone cells give us sharp, daylight, color vision. Under controlled conditions, about 130 gradations in color can be distinguished, as well as shadings within a given color. Vision in dim light or darkness is accomplished by the rods, which are ten to twenty times more numerous than the cones. Cones are not renewable but rod segments are constantly sloughed and regenerated every week of our lives.

If we were to follow the path of a single particle or photon of light energy on its journey through the lens of the eye to the retina, we would find that it is first absorbed by a single molecule of visual pigment called rhodopsin in a rod cell, and then ceases to be light because it has been absorbed by matter. The rhodopsin molecule, momentarily illuminated and energized, splits into its component chemical and protein substance, which will be recombined again in the subsequent darkness. The process of splitting releases positively charged atoms, leaving behind negatively charged atoms and causing a difference in electrical potential that can be transmitted along a nerve fiber [in the optic

nerve] to the brain. The light energy of the photon has become a neural impulse that can be used by the brain in its synthesis of the total visual image corresponding to the object of our gaze. The transformation from one form of energy [light] to another [electricity] has been accomplished by the mini-explosion or firing of a rhodopsin molecule. This process goes on simultaneously in millions of rods and cones in a repeated sequence of illumination and darkness, discharge and recharge.

Our eyes, at least during waking hours, are in almost continual motion, sweeping back and forth, up and down to pick out patterns and shapes in our perceptual field. It has been shown by sensitive instruments that, even when we gaze steadily and intently at a single object, our eyes are never still for longer than a fraction of a second. If the eye held the object any longer, the retina would adapt to the stimulus and the image would disappear. Instead of holding the object in view, the eye continually lets it go and returns to it so that a fresh stimulus may fall on the rods and cones. The movement happens so rapidly, and the brain is so efficient at filling in the gaps, that we do not notice what is actually happening.”

Wondrous as eyesight may be, it belongs to the material dimension of the human person. We should always remember that the human person is a composite of material and spiritual, and that our spiritual dimension is even more wondrous. Our human spirit animates every part of our body, brings it to life, and will never die because it has no material, perishable parts. Our human soul or spirit is principally our intellect and will but also imagination and memory. The human person, body and soul, is an image of God, but our spirit is especially the image of God, because God is spirit, without anything material, without a body.

We may wonder at the way our body and soul are held together, organically united as a single functioning, living entity, “which has existence

like the elements, life like plants, feeling like animals, and intelligence like the angels” (*Discours de l’Estat et des Grandeurs de Jesus*, 499–501). De Bérulle (1575–1629), an Oratorian priest, was a statesman, philosopher, theologian, and a deeply devout Catholic at the time of the Reformation. He saw in the human person, composed of body and spirit, what he called “an epitome of this universe” or the “universe in miniature” because we are material like the earth and the heavenly bodies as well as spiritual like the angels. De Bérulle also believed that God created the human being as “an image of the God-man, by whom we are recreated, and that in creating humanity God foreshadowed the mystery of the incarnation.”

Next we take the wonders of being human to a higher, religious dimension. There we find even stronger motives for wonder and amazement at oneself. St. John Paul II puts it in clear language, saying [*Redemptor Hominis*, #10]:

“How precious must man be in the eyes of the Creator, if he ‘gained so great a Redeemer’, and if God ‘gave his only Son’ in order that man ‘should not perish but have eternal life’ (Jn 3:16). In reality, the name for that deep amazement at man’s worth and dignity is the Gospel, that is to say, the good news. It is also called Christianity. This amazement determines the church’s mission in the world and, perhaps even more so, in the modern world.’ This amazement, which is also a conviction and a certitude—at its deepest root it is the certainty of faith, but in a hidden and mysterious way it vivifies every aspect of authentic humanism—is closely connected with Christ. It also fixes Christ’s place—so to speak, his particular right of citizenship—in the history of man and mankind. Unceasingly contemplating the whole of Christ’s mystery, the church knows with all the certainty of faith that the redemption that took place through the cross has definitively restored his dignity to man and given back meaning to his life in the world, a meaning that was lost to a considerable extent because of sin. And for that reason, the redemption was accomplished in the paschal mystery, leading through the cross and death to resurrection.”

To conclude this section on the wonders of being human, St Augustine has a thought worth keeping in mind:

*People travel to wonder at the height of mountains,
at the huge waves of the sea,
at the long courses of rivers,
at the vast compass of the ocean,
at the circular motion of the stars;
and they pass by themselves without wondering.
- St. Augustine*

4 Obstacles to living with a sense of wonder

A. Haste. We will consider two obstacles, haste and fear. You have noticed that some people are always in a hurry, not because they are always late but because they are driven by some inner energy to reach the goal first. Even if the goal is reaching the next traffic light, which always turns red just before they get to it.

It is not only physical speeding that obstructs the attitude of wonder, but a whole way of living that refuses to take time for things, including people. Haste refuses to dwell or linger even at the dinner table. It refuses to be interested in things on the way to its goal. Note that the word *interest* literally means “to be in between,” that is, to dwell with what lies between the starting line and the goal line.

Hasty living goes for the goal and is blind to everything else. Instead of pausing to wonder, it passes by, speeds by, as if propelled by a revved-up twin-carb engine going full throttle. Hasty living does not have time for musing, wondering, enjoying, or being amazed. It does not have time for the way but only for the goal. The fact is, however, that life meets us on the way. As philosopher Martin Heidegger says, “Everything lies on the way.” If I miss what is on the way, I miss some of the best things of life, I miss everything that makes life worth living, including relationships and love. Haste spins me out of the stream of life, like throwing a flat stone to make it skip across the stream. I am skimming and bouncing along the surface like that flat stone, when the richest life lies in the depths not on the surface. A hasty life is a superficial life.

A person with an active sense of wonder refuses to skim the surface. A person who wishes to cultivate wonder can be detected by the way he moves, turns, gazes, listens, picks up things and places them down. It is difficult for us pragmatic, activist Americans to appreciate a slowed-down style of living as traditionally practiced in monasteries. (Traditionally if not actually.)

Haste may not be such a temptation to Asians as it is to Westerners. I once heard an American express frustration at watching a Japanese Tea Ceremony. He had to leave before it was over, because they were doing it all so slowly. It was driving him mad. He was thinking, if you want to make tea, why don't you just go ahead and make the tea and get over with. Don't brew, use a tea bag. Don't even use a tea bag, use instant tea. Instead a Zen tea ceremony is a lengthy ritual, like a liturgy or a sacrament. [See description in Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen*. Helpful throughout this section is Mary Mester, *Spiritual Awakening and a Sense of Wonder*, 1975]

B Fear

For some, fear is another obstacle to a life of wonder. Some people who are overly fearful or who have phobias close off the possibility of an experience of wonder. Instead of wonders they see threats on every side. They avoid surprises and unfamiliar happenings, because they fear what might happen: the walls may close in and crush them or the earth may open and swallow them or they may fall from the high places. It can be quite frightening to hold oneself between a familiar world and the unfamiliar, in that empty insecure space between the two.

Mystery may evoke wonder but in itself it is terrifying as well as fascinating. It draws but also pushes us away for fear of it. Recall the short ending of Mk's gospel, after the women encounter the angel in the empty tomb: "Coming out they fled from the tomb, for trembling and bewilderment [*tromos, ekstasis*] possessed them; and they told no one anything, for they were afraid" (Mk 16:8). The women's response was the typical human response when we run up against Reality in its fullest, divine dimension. Who wouldn't tremble in their boots? Poet T.S. Eliot says: "Human kind cannot bear very much reality." Too much reality strikes terror into our hearts; we prefer to stay in our own familiar, comfortable little world and not venture beyond.

Such a choice keeps us safe, calms our fears, but it also curtails our human potential. On the level of knowing and loving, we have the potential to dance with the angels. Why let fear hold us back when we have an innate ability to go beyond the limited, to transcend the immediate, to contemplate the total not just the partial, and even to unite with the whole of Reality by union with God? Why let fear hold us back from cultivating our highest human capacity, the capacity for God. Sadly, many people fear to surrender to God; they do not know what they are missing.

When we have fears, we have a choice of facing our fears or trying to flee from them. If we flee, our fears will follow us and we will never be free of them. If we face them, we might or we might not overcome them, but at least we have a chance to overcome them. If someone who is afraid of heights faces that fear and goes up to the top of the Eifel tower in Paris, maybe the fear of heights will be conquered forever, or maybe not, but you'll never know until you try it.

It's a little different when we are confronted with the mystery of God. I can never hope to master my feeling of reverent fear before the all-holy, the infinite and all-powerful. The proper response is to stand in contemplative wonder before this absolute mystery that is the living God. If my love for God is strong enough, it will eventually empower me to surrender and to trust God's loving care for me. If I reach that stage, then I am standing no longer outside the divine Mystery but within it.

Here I am referring to a distinction made by the French Catholic philosopher Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973) who has a famous quotation, "The existence of God is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived." (Source not available but may be an adaptation of Soren Kierkegaard (1813–1855): "Life is not a problem to be solved but a reality to be experienced") Marcel says: "A problem is something met with, which bars my passage. It is before me in its entirety. A mystery, on the other hand, is something in which I find myself caught up and whose essence is therefore not to be before me in its entirety" (*Being and Having* London: Fontana Library, 1965, p. 109).

Once we have reached the point where we are talking about wonder as being caught up into the divine reality, then we have reached what the mystics call ecstasy or contemplative prayer. Then the following objection may come up. What about the practical demands of daily work

and earning our living? True, we can't all be standing around all day, mouths hanging open in wonder. At the same time, we have realize that the deepest purpose of human life is not productivity—turning out more and bigger eggs, cheeses, bales of hay, or whatever. That would be a Marxist notion of human life, reducing people to producers and consumers. Instead, according to Christian philosophy, the purpose of human life has more to do with the full and continual exercise of our highest human faculties: knowing and loving. Wonder is a blend of knowing and loving, and so it must be more valuable, humanly speaking not economically speaking, than production or achievement or getting the job done. Wonder of itself won't put bread on the table, not even "Wonder Bread." The company that tried that went bankrupt. Twinkies are coming back though.

5 Contemplative Wonder, Radical Amazement, and Breathless Awe

Returning to the spiritual level of contemplation and of mystery, if we are moved to wonder by the working of the human eye, how much more wondrous are the mysteries of our religion that can be known only through faith? If every human being is a mystery, how much more the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ? Our Cistercian forebears loved to contemplate the Incarnation. Like parents contemplating their new infant with endless, marveling love, the Cistercians let their imaginations roam over the image of Mary and Joseph watching in deepest wonder the divine child who was their child yet not begotten by them.

When it comes to the truths of faith, we can catch the feeling of wonder that filled the hearts of many authors in the New Testament. For example, reflecting on the mystery of our adoption as God's children, the author of the letters of John says, "See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are" (1 Jn 3:1). Later in his letter he marvels at God's love for us and concludes that God's very nature must be love: "We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us. God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God remains in him" (1 Jn 4:16).

Or think of St Paul reflecting on the mystery of God's eternal plan in which each of us has a part: "He [God the Father] has made known to us

the mystery of his will in accord with his favor that he set forth in him as a plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth” (Eph 1:9–10). There are better translations that make that verse clearer, but God’s plan is truly something to wonder at, when we realize that every happening in our life is finally ordered to shaping the one perfect totality that is the fullness of Christ, the *pleroma*. That is good news indeed! It made St Paul exclaim, “We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28).

Another mystery to be amazed at, a mystery that we can never master, is God’s mercy toward each of us individually, though we are sinners. God shows us this mercy again and again, until we realize that we live by this divine mercy. We are enveloped in mercy. As Thomas Merton puts it in one of his books, *The Sign of Jonas*: “Mercy within mercy within mercy.” This line is the epitaph on his cemetery cross, I believe. [Compare Winston Churchill concerning the actions of Russia: “It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma”—speech broadcast 1939/10/1]

As we have seen, the spirit of wonder can be nourished by the extraordinary, but we do not have to wait for something out of the ordinary. Seeing the Grand Canyon for the first time may take your breath away and leave you speechless with wonder, but life is not made up of extraordinary, stimulating moments like that. The spirit of wonder can thrive on the ordinary, can be aroused by poor and simple things, can see the mystery of life and the mystery of God in the concrete situations of daily life. Jesus says, “Learn from the way the wild flowers grow. They do not work or spin” (Mt 6:28). The more familiar translation talks about the lilies of the field. Ordinary things like the lilies of the field can reveal the hidden reality of God’s care for all his creatures, protecting and watching over their growth and beauty. Many of the deep lessons Jesus taught about the Kingdom were communicated through parables drawn from ordinary daily experience, from a world of fishnets, seeds and weeds, lanterns and coins, water, light, wind, shepherds, vinedressers, and tax collectors. Learn from everything around you. Take a close look. It takes more than healthy vision to behold the lilies of the field, to really see how they grow and see what that growth and beauty reveal about God our Father and Provider.

Wonder can thrive on the ordinary, because it can see beyond the ordinary. UN General Secy Dag Hammarskjold wrote: “Then a tree becomes a mystery, a cloud a revelaton, each man a cosmos of whose riches we can only ctach glimpses. The life of simplicity is simple, but it opens to us a book in which we never go beyond the first syllable” (*Markings* 174). An internationally important statesman, a leader of vision and integrity, Hammarskjold knew that the living source of his energy could be touched only by a spirit of wonder. He said “God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason” (*Markings* 56). He says also that the spirit of wonder is what keeps us alive and creative as human beings; people deny God’s existence because they lack openness to the deep, transcendent meaning of created reality around them, but God does not die on that day—the unbelievers die.

Without wonder people perish spiritually. That is, without wonder in the sense of an openness of the human spirit to all that is, to the total range of reality beyond the immediate object or interaction that faces me. Monastic life is meant to be a safeguard against our becoming short-sighted, encapsulated in ourselves, preoccupied with our own pursuits. Monastic life gives us the environment for contemplative openness to the manifestation of God in whatever surprising form God chooses to appear: whether in the form of a slice of fresh warm bread or in the form of a small round host placed in my open hand.

Religion without wonder, monastic life without wonder, is flat, lusterless, uninspired, spiritless, mere drudgery, mere endurance. With wonder, monastic life becomes a continued search for God in whatever form the divine Mystery may manifest itself. These forms are almost innumerable around us. There is no need to fear that we will exhaust our capacity for wonder. As a scripture scholar says, “The great secret is that the more this capacity is exercised, the more it grows and the more satisfaction it brings” (Alonso Schökel, “The experience of the Psalmist,” *The Way*, July 1977, Vol 17, No. 3, p. 195).

Sometimes time passes without our being aware of it during a period of intense wonder and joy. We are lifted out of ourselves, enthralled. It’s like a Rip van Winkle experience in miniature. “The story is told of a monk who went out one exceptionally fine spring morning to hear the

meadowlark sing, and when he returned all his friends had died; three hundred years had gone by” (Gabrielle Bossis, *He and I*, trans Evelyn Brown, Sherbrooke, Quebec: Editions Paulines, 1969, Vol II, Intro).

6. Living in the Place of Wonderment

The phrase, “place of wonderment,” comes from a book *On Prayer* by an eighth-century monk named John the Elder, Letter 12. A disciple has a question about continual prayer as St Paul calls it in 1 Th 5:17: “Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing.” John the Elder answers:

“This prayer is the greatest of all labors: it opens the door to *the place of wonderment*, it gives rest to weariness, it stills all movements. Maybe you will say, ‘You are speaking about wonderment, and I do not know the meaning of wonderment.’ Let me adduce as testimony the words of a certain brother, who is worthy to be believed; he used to say, ‘When the grace of my God so wills it within me, it draws my intellect to wonder at the sight of him, so that it remains the entire day motionless, *in the place of wonderment*. Then, once it has left there, it again prays and supplicates that the light of hidden Being that is hidden within him may shine forth in the world full of wonder.’ From that point onwards there is no place for words, no place where the pen’s torrent could travel along the paths of ink. Here the boundary is set, namely, silence. Only the mind is permitted to cross over and have a sight of that place where all symbols find their rest. For the mind is authorized to enter and wonder at the wondrous beauty which is beyond all, yet hidden within all.

8. ‘Thus any prayer that is not from time to time transformed in wonder at the mysteries has not yet reached consummation, as we explained above. Nor can prayer consisting of stirrings last continuously if it has not tasted at all of the wonder which comes with the joy of God. Continuous prayer is wonder at God: that is the sum of our message.’”

A. To live always in the place of wonderment is to practice continual prayer, which St Paul associated with joy. Wonder at God induces joy. Sometimes the wonder and the joy seem to sweep people away. I have two examples. The first is from the Jewish Hasidic tradition. The Jewish

Hasids were the pious ones, the holy ones, part of a movement founded in the 18th century, emphasizing spirituality over legalism. They try to be sensitive to the word of God, both written in the Hebrew Scriptures and also unwritten but appearing in everyday life. God is a talking, self-revealing Mystery, a Mystery even as he reveals himself to us. God speaks and humans listen to the wonder of a talking God.

There is a story about Rabbi Zusya, one of the Hasidim, who was swept away by the very thought of God speaking to human beings. The story takes place at a gathering of the Hasidim around a table for a sermon by their teacher, called the *maggid*. It goes like this: “Rabbi Zusya hardly ever heard his teacher’s sermon out to the end. For at the very start, when the *maggid* recited the verse from the Scriptures which he was going to expound, and began with the words of the Scriptures, ‘And God said,’ or ‘and God spoke,’ Rabbi Zusya was overcome with ecstasy, and screamed and gesticulated so wildly that he disturbed the peace of the round table and had to be taken out. And then he stood in the hall or in the woodshed, beat his hands against the walls, and cried aloud: ‘And God said!’ He did not quiet down until my ancestor had finished expounding the Scriptures. That is why he was not familiar with the sermons of the *maggid*. But the truth, I tell you—I tell you, the truth is this: If a man speaks in the spirit of truth and listens in the spirit of truth, one word is enough, for with one word can the world be uplifted, and with one word can the world be redeemed.” (Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: Early Masters*, p. 236).

A Christian who reads this story thinks of the Word of God that is Jesus, who indeed is the one who uplifted and redeemed the world. To have that one Word is more than enough.

B. The second example is from a nineteenth-century British Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–89), considered to be the greatest religious poet of the Victorian era. Poets, as we have seen, often have a heightened sense of wonder. Hopkins lived in the place of wonderment, although emotionally he was afflicted with depression, gloom, and melancholy till almost the end of his life. We will consider his poem “God’s Grandeur.”

God’s Grandeur

THE WORLD is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod; 5
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things; 10
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.
[Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, ed W. H. Gardner,
Baltimore: Penguin Bks, 1970, 27]

We can borrow the following synopsis from Sparknotes:
<http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/hopkins/section1.rhtml>

The first four lines of the octave (the first eight-line stanza of an Italian sonnet) describe a natural world through which God's presence runs like an electrical current, becoming momentarily visible in flashes like the refracted glintings of light produced by metal foil when rumped or quickly moved. Alternatively, God's presence is a rich oil, a kind of sap that wells up "to a greatness" when tapped with a certain kind of patient pressure. Given these clear, strong proofs of God's presence in the world, the poet asks how it is that humans fail to heed ("reck") His divine authority ("his rod").

The second [four lines or quatrain] within the octave [first eight lines of the sonnet] describes the state of contemporary human life—the blind repetitiveness of human labor, and the sordidness and stain of "toil" and "trade." The landscape in its natural state reflects God as its creator; but industry and the [valuing] of the economic over the spiritual have transformed the landscape, and robbed humans of their sensitivity to the those few beauties of nature still left. The shoes people wear sever the physical connection between their feet

and the earth they walk on, symbolizing an ever-increasing spiritual alienation from nature.

The final six lines of the sonnet, enacting a turn or shift in argument, assert that, in spite of the fallenness of Hopkins's contemporary Victorian world, nature does not cease offering up its spiritual indications. Permeating the world is a deep "freshness" that testifies to the continual renewing power of God's creation. ["there lives the dearest freshness deep down things," that is within things.] This power of renewal is seen in the way morning always waits on the other side of dark night. The source of this constant regeneration is the grace of a God who "broods" over a seemingly lifeless world with the patient nurture of a mother hen. This final image is one of God guarding the potential of the world and containing within Himself the power and promise of rebirth. With the final exclamation ("ah! bright wings") Hopkins suggests both an awed intuition of the beauty of God's grace, and the joyful suddenness of a hatchling bird emerging out of God's loving incubation." Note the association between awe and joy at the Holy Spirit's beauty, the wonder suggested by the concluding phrase, "with ah! bright wings."

Conclusion. Hopkins also has a translation of the Eucharistic hymn *Adoro Te*, that includes this line: "Lo here lies a soul / lost, all lost, in wonder / at a God so near." It is the He describes a posture of adoration, of being lost in wonder, not only before the Blessed Sacrament but before every manifestation of the Divine.

Wonder sharpens our appreciation of beauty whether in liturgy, art, architecture, or nature, including human nature. Wonder discovers a deep-down freshness that the eye never tires of seeing or the ear of hearing. Wonder can awaken us to a richer and fuller way of being in the world, enlarging our horizon to include the whole of reality. Poet William Blake has this line: "To see a world in a grain of sand / And a Heaven in a wild flower. ' Holy Infinity in the palm of your hand / And eternity in an hour" ["Auguries of Innocence," *A Concise Treasury of Great Poems*, ed. Louis Untermeyer, NY: Pocket Books, 1964, 193]. Wonder gives us a new perception of what was already there but never noticed before. There is always something

that can excite our wonder, because reality is inexhaustibly mysterious, always concealing more than it reveals, because it flows from the hand of an infinitely creative Mystery who makes each creature be exactly as it is.