

Introduction

What is wonder? It's easier to describe the way it affects us than the essence of the thing itself. It's the sharp intake of breath, the sight which gives you goosebumps, the "wow!" Sometimes, at least, it's a moment which takes us beyond ourselves, leaves us surprised or humbled in the presence of something bigger than us.

Gunilla Norris, in her book *Simple Ways - Towards The Sacred*, writes: "To wonder is open-ended and full of attention. It allows for fresh nuances, even when we seem to experience the same thing many times. To wonder is to be alive with curiosity and spaciousness and with such courtesy towards the given that it has the chance to become a gift for us."

The specific things which spark wonder might be different for each of us: the view from the top of a mountain, or a sunset glimpsed from a crowded train; a symphony orchestra in full flow or a radiant busker in the subway. The important thing is that wonder is more than just a "wow" moment. It lifts us, consoles us, and — if we let it — it changes us.

But it doesn't always come easily. Children are generally quite good at wonder, but busy adult lives don't leave much time to be awestruck. Wonder slips away and we don't even remember to miss it. Meanwhile, digital culture bombards us constantly with images, from the beautiful to the dull to the deeply unpleasant. We end up feeling over-stimulated, but under-nourished.

Monica C Parker's book *The Power of Wonder* is a psychological study of wonder as an emotion, how it works and how to get more of it in our lives. When I read her description of the "wonder cycle", I was struck by how similar it is to contemplative prayer practice. It all but mirrors the stages of *Lectio Divina*!

Wonder begins with noticing, being in the moment, standing still. Then, a glance becomes a longer look. Curiosity draws us in closer, as it did Moses, who left the path to look at the burning bush. There is pondering, questioning. Then there is a moment (or longer) of absorption, of gazing. Moses stayed long enough, after all, to hear the voice of God in the burning bush.

Parker breaks down the emotion of awe into two parts: the spontaneous moment of wonder, and the reflection which comes afterwards as we attempt to fit our heads around the experience. The psychological term is “expectation violation”: something that doesn’t quite fit into our understanding of the world. If something wondrous doesn’t fit into the structures by which we understand the world, the structures need to change. There needs to be a shift.

So wonder is more than the “wow” moment, it is a gift which can change us, and I believe it’s a gift that God would like to offer us more of. There can be no better time for it than Advent, when we celebrate a story full of “expectation violations” with, at its heart, the mystery of God come to earth as a human being, one of the greatest wonders of all.

“Radical amazement” is the term coined by the Jewish theologian and philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel. He believed it was the best attitude with which to approach God, and to deepen our relationship with One who is mystery. In that sense awe is (he wrote) “more than an emotion, it’s an act of understanding. Awe, itself, is an act of insight into a meaning greater than ourselves.”

Gerard W. Hughes SJ considered various titles for his seminal 1985 book on Ignatian spirituality before he settled on *God of Surprises*. “God,” he writes, “is always greater than anything or anyone we can think of or imagine.” So, while we can be secure in God’s love and compassion, we are invited to journey deeper into the Mystery, bolstered by our capacity for wonder and surprise.

If wonder is a useful tool for approaching what Karl Rahner called “the incomprehensible Holy Mystery”, it is also good for helping us live in a world which gives us more questions than answers. Hard questions can sometimes be transformed by the phrase “I wonder”. Wondering is an open, hopeful way to inhabit the questions and uncertainties of life.

So bring your curiosity, and an open heart, as we enter this wonder-rich season together. I wonder what the next few weeks have in store....

POSTSCRIPT

Whether it's gardening, gratitude, meditation, reading, writing, interpretive dance, drum circles, sky diving, surfing, magic tricks, science fairs, poetry jams, flower arranging, wood carving, bedazzling, or underwater basket weaving, wonder is about what moves you. Find that captivating, emotionally daunting, enchanting, perspective-inducing, ineffable experience that makes you feel like a small piece in a grand cosmic puzzle and whatever it is, do more of it.

Monica C. Parker, *The Power of Wonder*

A Little Light Reading...

Books which have been my companions as I have prepared this series include:

Monica C. Parker, *The Power of Wonder* (Tarcher Perigee, 2023) is not coming from a faith perspective, but delves into the psychology of wonder and why it's good for us. For their own thoughts on wonder and wonder experiences, I'm indebted to: Eva Heymann, *The Deeper Centre* (Darton Longman & Todd, 2006), Gunilla Norris, *Simple Ways - Towards the Sacred*, (SPCK, 2012), Judy Cannato, *Radical Amazement*, (Sorin Books, 2006). Cannato's book is particularly good on the wonders of the cosmos and helped me finally understand (just about) how we are all made of stardust.

Two books by Gerard W. Hughes, written at very different stages of his life, *God of Surprises* (Darton Longman & Todd, 1985) and *Cry of Wonder* (Bloomsbury, 2014) have been insightful. Thank you, Gerry, for so much, and for never losing your sense of wonder.

A Note on the Text

Small differences may occur between the written text and audio versions of the reflections. These are minor and do not affect the wider meaning of the text. I try, as far as it is possible, to describe God in a way which is ungendered.

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Thank you for ordering this retreat and may you be blessed on your journey.