

# It's a Wonder-Full Life

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*2012 Commencement Address,  
Providence Christian College, Pasadena,  
CA; Esther L. Meek*

Greetings and congratulations, Providence's Class of 2012. Greetings as well to family and friends, and to faculty. Thank you for the honor of inviting me to share your celebration of this great day. Being awarded a degree for completion of a course of study is a big deal. I hope you sense its wonderful weightiness in this ceremony.

I love teaching college students—being involved in their lives at such a critical coming of age. But--! I may be even more ecstatic about the prospect of your months and years ahead as 20Someones<sup>1</sup>, as you move to a riskier, complicated, profounder, richer, period of finding your way in the life God has for you. Today, take your friends along with you if you can, and don't look back! Don't worry—

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Dunham and Doug Serven, *Twentysomeone: Finding Yourself in a Decade of Transition* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2003).

the seeds your profs and courses have planted in your lives will sprout and flower and bear fruit. Your education only continues from here.

Your college experience has likely been both the richest and most wearying of times; your next decade, you will probably say, is the same, for different reasons. It can be deadening to master bodies of information, to fight to meet one paper deadline after another. Also, it can be deadening to work two jobs to pay off loans, to take on uninspiring work to support your spouse and your baby, or to hunt for months for employment. It can be deadening to fight back the thorns and thistles of our broken experience. Doing nothing can be deadening, too. Boredom is about as dead as it gets.

So as my commencement gift to you, I want to offer a few minutes' reflection on *wonder*. I commend its cultivation to you, to dispel all deadness, to nourish you deeply through your life. It does not cost any money, and requires no travel and no inscrutable research to find it. It is free and near and present. It will make you better at everything—at your job, your life with God, your relationships, your worldcare—at being you. It will make life wonder-full.

Over the years, your capacity to wonder, or your lack of it, will shape you tellingly. Just think of older people you know—you can pick out the wonderers. But the good news is that in the end, in everyone's life, wonder wins. It may be poignant or tragic, but it will win. Better to have yielded to wonder, to have cultivated it, from the getgo. (And isn't that what "commencement" means—the getgo?)

## Wondering about wonder

*Wonder* is a word that can evoke the thing it names. You say, "wonder," and you find yourself haunted afresh by something bigger than all words, and this word, that you have thrown at it. On the other hand, talking about wonder, offering an account of wonder, can be the antithesis of wonder. —as in, "I just told you all you need to know about wonder; now we can move on." No; wonder is not exhausted by words, but is something poised silently just beyond them, ready to break in, to apprehend and recenter us, to clothe and still us like the Man of the Gadarenes.

What is that something that glimmers just beyond words, at times infusing and engulfing them? That something is—are you ready for it?—*reality*—what philosophers call, *Being*. It is what is there.

Why should Being be so wonder-full? Isn't it just dirt? Scripture avers that God the Most Wonder-full words every atom in every instant into existence. Being is *that which might not be*—what gets called, *contingent*. The actual existence of the tiniest particle is contingent on the specific word of God. *It might not be. That it nevertheless is is wonder-full.* And that it is by a word of God is wonder-full: reality is at bottom His remarkable word. There is nothing underneath. Reality is *gift*, God's moment-by-moment gift. He says, "let there be"—he consents to being—and that is utterly gracious. Reality, being, is such that at Christmas, a time of wonder, the Word *could* become incarnate in it, because all that is real already is the wonder-full Word of God.

And do not make the mistake of mentally removing the gift from the Giver. No—He is there, here, upholding the tiniest thing by the word of His power. Real things are God's clothes, says Calvin, the outer fringes of His glory, says Job. You want to see God at work? Check out the mitosis occurring this second literally under your nose.

Another thing about being: it also "*may yet be.*" Reality is "fraught with as-yet unnameable future prospects," as Michael Polanyi says. There is far more unfolding

depth to anything real than we have been inclined to expect. We regularly commit egregious noetic crime against the deep, multi-faceted, revelatory, creation of God. We have presumed that we state a proposition or write a lab report about something, and then we are done with it, having exhaustively elucidated its reality. But as Annie Dillard says, nature is a fan-dancer, and she never ever drops the "last" fan.<sup>2</sup> Not only is there nothing underneath, there is profound *mystery* within and beyond. And unlike the terror that Jorge Borges' *Book of Sand* imagines that this induces, this mystery evokes *delight*; it is *present* and *inviting*, the way a loved person is near and inviting. Being, far from being static and dead, is ever surprisingly new and renewed.

The tiniest real thing, the smallest "is," is wonder-full. It is wonder-full in its might-not-be-ing, in its being gift, and in His being, in it, so very near. "One real thing is closer to God than all the diagrams of the world," says Robert Farrar Capon.<sup>3</sup> There is a splendor of ordinary things themselves, a palpable mystery in full

view. To see it aright is to be taken by its wonder, and to be taken in wonder. But we must also be careful not to overspiritualize our engaging the real. To be taken in wonder with being does not mean seeing some deeper spiritual meaning or purpose. That would actually be just as dismissive, also a noetic crime. No—just its thereness, its being, is wonder-full. Being is the wonder-full that is in, near, beyond our words.

So wonder requires, first, that we take our own theology seriously regarding being. You don't just quote "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible," (Heb 11:3) and then close the book, shut off the microscope, and play a video game. (I don't mean to say that video games are not themselves wonder-full!) You don't just quote it and then run to church or Bible Study or to a Christian service project—as if that's the only thing that God cares about or the only place we meet God. How could we think that real ordinary things are removed from His care and presence? How could we forget that each atom with its mysteries is His word, His presence, the exuberant overflow of the Trinity's dance of delight? Rather, as Calvin Seerveld says of the classroom: you must take off your

<sup>2</sup> Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: HarperCollins, 1974), ch. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Farrar Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Reflection*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967), 22.

shoes, for you are on holy ground, close by the burning bush of God's near presence.<sup>4</sup> You have come to college to dwell in the presence of being, to attend to it, to invite it, to wait for it, and if you are blessed, to be known graciously and transformatively by it. And you go forward from this day to do the same.

*Wisdom*, wouldn't you say, requires wonder and begins with wonder. Indeed, Aristotle said that philosophy begins with wonder; and "philosophy" means love of wisdom.<sup>5</sup> In its connection with the might-not-being of being, wonder is integrally bound with the fear of the Lord—wouldn't you say?—and the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Would you be educated? Would you be wise? You must be good at wonder. You must cultivate the orientation of wonder.

### Where has all the wonder gone?

You may well ask why, if wonder is so natural a response to being, so profoundly biblical, so healthful and conducive to

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<sup>4</sup> Calvin Seerveld, *Rainbows for a Fallen World* (Toronto: Tuppence, 1980), ??.

<sup>5</sup> As Kenneth Schmitz confirms, wonder does not seem to survive his explanation in terms of causes (*The Recovery of Wonder: The New Freedom and the Asceticism of Power* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 2005), 37.

wisdom, we might need an exhortation to cultivate it. The fact is that there has been a problem, something getting in the way of wonder. You can guess, since your speaker is Dr. Meek, that I will say that the problem is epistemological.

My colleague, Robert Frazier, writes that "our discordant epistemological schemes do much to create this dullness" to the sense of the wonder-full.<sup>6</sup> He cites Abraham Joshua Heschel saying that "wonder has been compromised in the modern world," by the Enlightenment presumption that everything advances and progresses.<sup>7</sup>

My colleague supports this claim by showing that Father of modern philosophy, Rene Descartes, substituted doubt, and, I would argue, certainty, for wonder.<sup>8</sup> And he showed that Francis Bacon deemed wonder a form of ignorance, something meant to be replaced by the knowledge which is power. So here I am challenging both Descartes and Bacon when I say that *wonder is the graciously inbreaking sense of the depth of being, which one senses exceeds one's capacity to understand it;*

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<sup>6</sup> Frazier, "Wonder," 12.

<sup>7</sup> Frazier, "Wonder," 2-3.

<sup>8</sup> Frazier, "Wonder," 5-6.

*and when I say that wonder, far from being ignorance, is actually the profoundest understanding of and communion with things.* It is in wonder alone that reality *knows us*, intimately intertwining our own wondrous being with itself in communion. In wonder we are most *with* its mysterious depths, the wonder of the might-not-be, of the palpable fragile present of "is", of the may-yet-be—all in the I-You encounter, to employ Martin Buber's famous phrase. In wonder alone we encounter and commune with being.

We have inherited in the (especially modern) Western tradition the epistemic presumption that knowledge is information, propositionally stated, supported logically by other propositions.<sup>9</sup> We have baptized theoretical knowledge as the paradigm, and analysis and critique as the approved method of access.<sup>10</sup>

This default presumption, however, itself *exiles wonder*, along with all passion and a lot of other things, entirely out of

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<sup>9</sup> Esther Lightcap Meek, *Loving to Know: Introducing Covenant Epistemology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), ch. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Schmitz argues that *theoria* didn't used to be so thin and disconnected as it now seems to be. *Recovering Wonder*, 22-24.

knowledge. It also has proven to screen us from reality breaking in. It has rendered being wonder-less. It is, as such, atheistic. Despite this, Protestant Christians have tacitly embraced this epistemic: the goal of the Christian life, for many, appears to be comprehensive Christian information. What a sacrilege to Him who IS Truth!

Where pedagogy, efforts to educate, and educational assessment have presumed this defective epistemic default, education has been equated with information transfer. Where our own perception of what we are doing when we know is one of dispassionate information collecting, our orientation toward reality cannot be one of wonder. It is small wonder (!) that we struggle with uninvolvedness, indifference and boredom, with skepticism and cynicism.

But can there be another way to view knowing? An epistemology that accredits and cultivates wonder? I believe that there is. Michael Polanyi says that we must relate to information as clues on which we rely subsidiarily, attending from them to invite the insight of profounder pattern. The act of coming to know—the epistemic act—is not the passive transferral of explicit information from one mind to another. It is not so much information as it is *transformation*, the

gracious inbreaking a profounder pattern of meaning and reality. The moment of insight transforms whatever we were relying on, curiously relativizing it even as it renders it preciously meaningful. It binds it and us dynamically together in this wondrous, greater real.

Our effort to indwell clues we have yet to understand as such evokes reality rather than presuming to exhaust it. Being breaks in in its telltale intimately present mystery and apprehends us. Even the words we were saying, along with our own selves, get graciously, wonderfully, altered in the encounter. “OHHHH...” we say, as reality invades and recenters us: “I get it.” Epiphany. And we can sense that we have been visited by God.

Heschel says, “The Greeks learn in order to comprehend; the Hebrews learn in order to be apprehended.”<sup>11</sup> That we may be apprehended by the real is in no way guaranteed. Insight involves an act of grace, a deliverance from outside. Reality encounters us graciously. What else would you expect of a reality that is, through and through, the fragile might-not-be of God?

This epistemology accords with being. Knowing is itself an orientation to being that invites wonder with every wooing of the real. It is to love, to long, to know.

May we college products, poised to dive into the work force, cultivate the epistemic orientation of wonder? The information-analysis-critique paradigm has infected even Christian academics, even though Christian academics should of all academics be healed of it. It has infected our churches. And it deeply infects our Western mode of life and work. It’s a powerful default. It actually is comfortable for our irresponsibility, for our sinful penchant to evade the truth in all His comings. It’s easier to have a checklist or a bottom line, so that we can say we are educated and get a job, so that we can assess our performance as learners and workers. But we are nevertheless always immersed in being. It is near; it is here. The real graciously breaks in often even when our lamps have not been trimmed. Epiphany occurs.

And we may ever school ourselves to invite the real in wonder. Here are some postures and practices which prompt wonder. First, *presence*. You have to be present—present in yourself, present before being. This might be called, centering. For me it meant putting myself

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<sup>11</sup> Bob Frazier’s paraphrase.

in reverse and backing up out of the future. For some it means letting go of the past. Being, and God, come in the present. But even if you are not present, like those virgins, reality may yet graciously break in and do it for you. But that might not be so fun at first!

Second, *unhurried time*, a good portion of this in solitude. Slow down your life, in Sabbath-like rhythm. Say no to some activities, even “spiritual” ones. Resist the overwhelming pressure and false glamour of busyness. Resist these in order to...*be*...to invite the real. The word, “scholar” is related to the Latin word for *free*. It reflects the old and correct assumption that reality discloses itself to those freed to take the time to wait for it. Expect that revelations come to those who take time to attend.

Third, *attend in love* to what is before you, waiting for it to manifest itself as you do for Him. Take inside you what presents itself, letting it weave your life into its own. Expect reality to come, in the very place you are looking, but not in the way you were expecting. Welcome that wonder, and let it recenter you more profoundly in the orientation that is wonder itself. Go at your relationships, your work, your play, and your discipleship in this way.

Fourth, cultivate the following actions in a manner that accords with the contingency, the might-not-being, which alone makes them what they are: *gratitude, worship, excitement, delight, love*. Gratitude says, You might not have given me this gift. Worship says, You might not have created me nor redeemed me. Excitement says, this might not be happening. Delight says, what I am encountering might not be its wonderful self. Love says, you and I might not be giving ourselves to each other. All of these orient us to wonder.

There is another such item that in God’s mysterious dealings may orient us in wonder. And that is *suffering*. Suffering, if we embrace it, says, I, who might not be, this pain-wracked flesh, am here, and you, dear Lord, the Man of Sorrows, acquainted with grief, are here with me.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote:

Earth’s crammed with heaven,  
and every common bush afire with God  
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes  
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Ravi Zacharias, *Recapture the Wonder* (Nashville: Integrity, 2003), 127.

May each of us here be seers who take off our shoes in wonder. The Lord grant you a wonder-full life.

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