

Aesthetics and a sense of wonder

by Ruth A. Wilson

Rachel Carson (1956) — scientist, writer, and environmentalist — tells us that “A child’s world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement” (p. 42). Many of us have heard and been inspired by these words, but may not have a clear idea about what wonder really is. This isn’t surprising, because wonder in different contexts can mean different things. As used by Carson, wonder refers to a “clear-eyed vision,” a “true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring” (p. 42). Wonder in this context is something we feel (an emotion), but also a ‘way of knowing’ based on intuition or natural instinct.

Wonder as an emotion

Emotions are what give zest to life, and quality and meaning to our existence.



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Some might say that emotions are what make life worth living. Yet some emotions (such as anger, jealousy, disgust, and sadness) may leave us feeling miserable. Wonder is different; it is an emotion which uplifts and inspires. We can count on wonder to enrich and ennoble our lives. As Carson (1956) says, wonder can serve “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” (p. 43).

We experience wonder as a spark inside of us — a spark which lights up our life and stirs our imagination. We also experience wonder as an emotion that takes us outside of ourselves and into a realm that is greater than ourselves. When strongly felt, this experience of “being outside of ourselves” — and outside of time — is sometimes referred to as ecstasy and is accompanied by intense joy or delight (Hart, 2005).

Beauty seems to play a special role in awakening our sense of wonder and allowing us to experience ‘self-forgetting’ moments of great joy and ecstasy (Johnson, 2002). Beauty can also lead us to an understanding of truth. The poet, John Keats, writes, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty — that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

Wonder as a way of knowing

We usually relate the concept of truth to something that conforms to fact or actuality; something that can be proven or arrived at through rational thought. We can thank poets, like Keats, to give us other ideas about the meaning of truth. By equating beauty and truth and linking this to a type of knowing, Keats’ words can help us appreciate another aspect of wonder — that is, wonder as a way of knowing. The type of knowing associated with wonder isn’t primarily about thinking; it’s more intuitive than rational and involves a “direct knowing” (Hart, 2005).

Children and wonder

The sense of wonder seems to be much more pronounced in children than in adults (Carson, 1956; Hart, 2005). Reflections of this can be seen in the way young children respond to and interact with certain elements of nature. Watch young children as it begins to snow or as they play in a pile of leaves. You’ll witness an abundance of exuberance and joy. You’ll see children wholly engaged in the now, and you’ll find them responding with their whole bodies. They’ll laugh, dance, run, listen, and perhaps even taste. Adults, on the other hand, are more likely to respond with thoughts about what

comes next and will spend little time immersing themselves in the moment and in the sensory experiences of what is happening around them. Adults see the snow and think of shoveling the driveway or become anxious about driving on icy roads. They see the leaves and think of all the raking they'll have to do.

Children's way of relating to the world corresponds to their unique way of knowing the world — that is, a way based more on wonder than analytical thought. Children know the world — especially the natural environment — in a deep and direct manner, not as a background for events. For children, the natural world is never formal or abstract, nor is it a scene or a landscape (Cobb, 1977; Sebba, 1991). Unfortunately, this way of knowing the world tends to dissipate over time. During the early stages of cognitive development—when learning is dependent on concrete perceptual experiences — perception conducts thought. With adults, however, perception obeys thought (Sebba, 1991; Wilson, 2010). With this shift, the sense of wonder usually diminishes rather quickly.

Adults would do well to recognize and honor children's way of knowing and strive to keep the children's and their own sense of wonder alive. Wonder, as Carson (1956) says, can serve as a life-long source of joy and enrichment. Wonder can also stimulate the imagination and serve as motivation for further learning (Cobb, 1977; Wilson, 2008). It may even be possible that it is only through wonder that we can come to know the world as it really is (Wilson, 2008).

Children, wonder, and aesthetic experiences

In working with young children, we often acknowledge the importance of aesthetic development. We provide opportunities for them to experience beauty; we draw attention to beautiful things; and we encourage children to create and rep-

resent beauty through the mediums of art, dance, and music. These efforts are based on the understanding that putting children in touch with beauty will enrich their lives and foster their sense of wonder. Aesthetic experiences do, indeed, provide these benefits for children. But there are other benefits, as well — some quite powerful in their potential impact on both children and society.

Providing aesthetic experiences and fostering their sense of wonder can help children see 'potential beauty' as well as the beauty being experienced in the moment. While children gain inspiration and enjoyment from being in touch with beauty, their 'sense of possibility' can also be nurtured and strengthened. This sense of possibility enables children to see a future different from what currently exists, including the possibility of seeing beauty in places now filled with ugliness, and seeing peace and harmony in places now filled with anger and discord. Along with this sense of possibility is the motivation to encourage further beauty into existence. Words of the Sufi poet, Rumi, remind us of this possibility: "Let the beauty we love be what we do" (Rumi, 1997).

Aesthetics includes the capacity to sense, appreciate, and respond emotionally to beauty in both human creations and the natural environment (Kemple & Johnson, 2002). When we reflect on the sources of beauty, we often limit our thinking to the physical manifestations of it — whether this is in human creations or the natural environment. There are, of course, social aspects to each, as well; and these social aspects can manifest great beauty and awaken a sense of wonder. Examples of human generosity and kindness come to mind, as do the social behaviors of elephants and dolphins. Certainly, the complex workings of bees and the dedication evident as birds feed and protect their young are other examples of beauty in the social aspects of the natural environment. Whether in human creations or the

natural environment, whether in physical manifestations or social realms, early aesthetic experiences are powerful and can have lasting significance (Kemple & Johnson, 2002).

Living with wonder

For many of us, that marvelous gift of wonder we enjoyed when we were children becomes "dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood" (Carson, 1956, p. 42). Perhaps this concern is what prompted Abraham Heschel to write, "I did not ask for success; I asked for wonder" (Heschel, 1983).

To keep the spark of wonder burning in our daily lives, it may be helpful to consider how children experience wonder. They remain present in the now; they open all their senses to what they're experiencing; and they engage their hearts — not just their minds — as they experience and reflect on the world around them. With some effort, we can do this, too. When taking a walk, for example, (or just spending time outdoors) we can make a conscious effort to really 'take in' everything around us. We can make a point of noticing sounds, scents, colors, temperatures, patterns of light and shadow, the shape of clouds, the presence and behavior of insects, subtle changes from one place to another. Such concentrated attention can help us see and experience things in new ways. It can help us find beauty in ordinary, overlooked places and experience inspiration and wonder in what otherwise is considered commonplace.

Another way to keep the spark of wonder alive is to surround ourselves with beauty. In *The Little Prince*, we read that since something is beautiful, it is truly useful (de Saint-Exupéry, 1943). That which is beautiful may not always be useful in the sense of what is most efficient or most readily available. But things and places of beauty can be useful to us in ways

which efficiency and expediency can never offer. The architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, once noted that if we foolishly ignore beauty, we will soon find ourselves without it. And a life without beauty, he said, is impoverished. Investing in beauty, he noted, would give us something of value that would remain with us all the days of our lives.

We know some things of beauty — like kittens, fresh flowers, and warm oatmeal cookies — may not always retain their freshness. Having once experienced their beauty, however, can enrich our lives over a long period of time. As Louise Chawla (1990) once noted, the spaces and views which we experience as children become inner landscapes or “ecstatic memories” which then remain with us “like radioactive jewels buried within us, emitting energy across the years of our life” (Chawla, 1990, p. 18). It would seem that ‘ecstatic memories’ and the energy they impart need not be confined to what we experience as children. Perhaps deep encounters with beauty — experienced at any age — can reap similar benefits.

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Recommended Reading for Fostering Wonder

For Children

All the Colors of the Earth by Sheila Hamanaka

The Curious Garden by Peter Brown

Frederick by Leo Lionni

The Other Way to Listen by Byrd Baylor and Peter Parnall

For Adults

The Sense of Wonder by Rachel Carson