

Part Three

**The Enigma
of
Wonder**

Chapter 12

The Thought, Feel, and Choice of Wonder

Ancient sages of the Orient found paths beyond the Yang of thought and the Yin of feeling into the Way of Wonder. In Sub-Asia, Hindu and Buddhist seers found methods of concentration that opened enlightenment beyond blinding thought, joy beyond reactive feelings, and liberation beyond fated compulsions. In the West great minds focused on Great Thoughts that carried consciousness beyond the customs of foolishness into experiences of Great Feels and Great Resolves that together with Great Thoughts witnessed to a landscape of Wonder.

Wonder is another word for *awe* and the *numinous*. Wonder lights up thought with new vigor. Wonder cleans feelings of their exaggerated sentiment. Wonder interrupts compulsive behaviors and restores us to the paths of freedom, effectiveness, and persistence. Wonder is a hard experience to talk about, but that has not prevented every era of humans from trying.

The Direct Experience of Wonder

Though Wonder is unknowable to the human mind, Wonder can be directly experienced by human consciousness. In this sense we can “know” Wonder. If this sort of knowing were not possible, then the word “Wonder” would be meaningless. Some have concluded that the word “Wonder” is meaningless, so they no longer use the word or any word like it – Divine, Sacred, or Holy. But this attitude undercuts our appreciation of the role of religion in human life – namely, the role of binding or connecting humans to that Landscape of Mystery, that River of Enigmatic Consciousness, that Mountain of Compassion, and that Wild Sea or Ocean of Courageous Tranquility. I will explore all that later. It takes poetry and imagination to speak of Wonder. It also takes courage, for security-hungry humans resist Wonder’s irrationality, its disturbing subversiveness, and its revolutionary implications.

Nevertheless, every human is close to Wonder, for it is our true nature. Humans, in their essence, are already connected to Wonder. Good religion assists us toward happenings of awakened awareness of this connection to Wonder that has been buried, suppressed, fought, ignored, denied, and unwelcomed by our ordinary states of consciousness.

“Good religion” appears in human life because Wonder is an inescapable human experience. Even though most people spend their entire lives escaping from Wonder, there is no escape. Human consciousness could as easily escape heart and brain as Wonder, for human consciousness is rooted in Wonder. So, like a persistent blood hound, Wonder tracks us down and forces us to see its teeth. Wonder is Real, more real than we, in our attempts to escape, can even imagine.

At the same time, this inescapable Wonder is beyond conceptual expression. So how do we even begin to talk about it as an everyday experience in our lives? One very old answer is, “We don’t talk about it.” One of the ancient Taoist writers put it this way: “Those who say don’t know, and those who know don’t say.” The prophets of Israel on the other hand, felt free to say, “Thus says the Eternal Authority,” and then wax on for 45 verses, hoping that at some point in their discourse the Wonder behind their speaking would break through to some captivated listener. But even these wordy prophets knew that what they were saying was an interpretation of experiences that were unsayable. There are many biblical verses that basically say, “The Ways of Yahweh are beyond finding out,” Jesus also insisted on being cryptic. He spoke in parables and explained that he did so in order that the know-it-all religious experts

would not understand what he was saying. I take this to mean that he required of his hearers a deep shift in their lives in order to grasp what his parables were pointing to. We see a similar sensibility in Zen Buddhist teachers when they use what they call “koans.” A koan is a cryptic statement designed by a wise teacher who then uses the koan to challenge in a student some deep shift in consciousness in order for the koan to have meaning to the student. A famous example is “Two hands clap and there is a sound. What is the sound of one hand?” In seeking an answer, the student must reach beyond his standard thinking into deeper awareness.

Great Thinks, Great Feels, and Great Resolves

Being conscious that we are conscious beings is impossible without the aid of the symbol-using mind, but it is also true that the thoughts of our mind are substitutes for the realities they symbolize. Thinking about thinking is a real challenge to our consciousness. Nevertheless, in order to clearly distinguish what we are pointing to with the word “Wonder,” we must distinguish the reality of thinking from the reality of consciousness and Wonder. As conscious contemplators of our inward reality, we need to notice and remain clear that thoughts are an important reality (a reality we think about a lot), but thoughts themselves are not synonymous with the Reality to which they point. Just as the finger pointing to the moon is not the moon, so every thought, while a real “finger,” is not the object to which that thought points.

The thoughts we think are parts of Reality, but the misidentification of the contents of thought with the contents of Reality is as far off the mark as viewing the words in a dictionary as the same as the objects and relations to which the words of that dictionary point. Our human thinking is a very complex biological gift that we can examine externally as acts of our brain and nervous system and view internally as our thinking mind. The thoughts of that thinking mind are like a wonderful dictionary that each culture of humans has created to augment its handling of Reality. This cultural dictionary is a valuable tool that our consciousness can use, but to use our dictionary well we must be clear that the items in our dictionary are not the same as the dynamics of Reality that these thoughts stand for or attempt to describe. And though thoughts point to Reality, they point to Reality partially. Reality is far more than our mental dictionary encompasses. Seeing this truth is the first step toward true wisdom. Such wisdom includes the insight that mind is not the same reality as consciousness. There has been a tendency in Western culture to see the words “mind” and “consciousness” as words for pretty much the same thing. But I am intent in making a precise distinction. As I am using these two words, “consciousness” is a word that points to the knower and actor of our being. “Mind” is a word that points to a tool that the consciousness “I” uses. Until we have demoted mind to the status of a very complex and wonderful tool, we are not yet ready to enjoy a clear perception of Wonder.

A person who is “lost in thought,” as we say, is not a true thinker. A true thinker is someone who is aware that his or her thoughts are not Reality, but are only pointers to Reality. A true thinker is therefore open to think different thoughts because of this awareness that Reality is always more than the thoughts we currently think. Reality does support some thoughts better than other thoughts, but no thoughts can be counted on to be the “last word” about Reality.

There are, however, what I am going to define as “**Great Thinks.**” A Great Think is a bit of mental poetry that has been derived from our transrational consciousness experiencing some experience of Wonder. It is as if that bit of rational poetry is so imbedded in Wonder as the content of its meaning that it is capable of communicating an experience of that Wonder to anyone open to the Wonder involved. And because our minds are ever-present, ever-working dynamics, our experiences of Wonder

always have (or perhaps almost always have) a Great Think component.

For example the “Great Think” that I have dwelled upon above that “Reality is beyond thought” can communicate to our consciousness a state of Wonder or Awe. I use “Awe” as a synonym for “Wonder.” I define “Awe” (and therefore “Wonder”) as a primal dread of the Unknown plus a fascination with the Unknown plus an elemental courage to remain conscious of this dread and this fascination with the Unknown.

Dread and fascination are words that point to a vast array of specific feelings in our bodies. These feelings are not thoughts, though we may have thoughts about them. The term “**Great Feel**” can be used to point to whatever feelings attend a specific experience of Awe/Wonder.

The courage it takes to remain conscious of these Great Feels and Great Thinks that attend some experience of Awe can be pointed to with the term “**Great Resolve.**” Any specific state of Awe can be communicated by describing the Great Thinks, Great Feels, and Great Resolves that attend that experience of Awe. This threefold description (Think, Feel, Resolve) is not the Awe itself but modes of description of the Awe. The Awe itself is an experience within some human being’s consciousness. The symbol-using mind can be a tool for sharing that Awe consciousness. Our bodily responses of feeling can be indicators of the presence of Awe. Our conscious willingness to be in Awe is also an indicator and component of the transrational experience that Awe is.

I will illustrate these three dynamics of an Awe experience by describing a simple experience of Awe that we have all likely experienced. Each of the following sentences can be said to be a Great Think that associates with this specific Awe experience:

Life and Death are two wings on the same bird.

Life is a countercurrent that turns rock, water, and air into living, and living is a fragile quality that death will turn back to rock, water, and air.

Death walks with us every day of our living. As Carlos Casteneda suggests, death walks behind us just over our left shoulder. If we turn our head quickly we might see death walking there.

Each of these thoughts comprise a Great Think if they awaken in us a Great Feel. So what is the Great Feel we feel when we think with sensitivity the just mentioned Great Thinks? We may experience this particular state of Awe as a pain we could do without. Death may come to us as a rawness that we may want to ignore or suppress or find some substitute for. We may say, “Let us think happier thoughts. Surely we need to flee somewhere rather than walk today with the experience of death.” But when we take courage to live with our dread, we find that we are also drawn to the experience of death. This draw is what we can point to with the word “fascination.” We go to funerals and wakes in order to honor the experience of death. We may tell ourselves that we go to a funeral to hear someone lie to us about the reality of death, but on a deeper level we go to such rituals as an act of courage to take in the dread and fascination of death and to allow our lives to be realistic in honoring real people and their real impermanence.

Great Thinks and Great Feels about the ever-presence of death do not remain in our consciousness without a Great Resolve, without a choice for Reality over escape. So how do we describe the Great Resolve required to live in the face of the Reality of the ever-presence of death? The Resolve might be described as a solidity of commitment about not being taken in by the superficiality of any assertion or implication that only a life without death is worth living. Real life and real death are worth living: this is the resolve that permits the Awe state we are describing. The mystery of coming into being and going out of being is the life that is worth living. Indeed, it is the only life

there ever was or ever will be. In this Great Resolve, I join the animals and the trees in affirming life; I rejoice in my privilege of having this opportunity to live, however short or however long this opportunity may last. As Psalm 90 puts it in the form of a prayer to Reality, "So teach us to count our days that we may enjoy a heart of wisdom." Such words as these enable our consciousness to notice the Great Resolve that enables us to experience and continue living in the Great Feel and Great Think that death walks with us every moment of our living. These three types of indicators describe one of our experiences of Awe before the Awesome Unknowable Reality in which we dwell.

There are an unlimited number of ways of being in Awe. Each Great Think carries us beyond what we think we know to a state of Awe that we "know" with our consciousness. And let us not forget that consciousness knows in a manner that baffles our thinking. Using the analysis of Great Thinks, Great Feels, and Great Resolves is a mode of poetic effort that points beyond itself to the Awe that we humans can experience in a manner that cannot be contained in rational thought.

In a specific Awe experience, a feeling of dread may predominate or a feeling of fascination may predominate. It may take great courage to sustain a particular state of Awe, or it may take only a little courage. Each Awe experience is unique. For example, "I am here and not not here" can be a Great Think that emphasizes fascination. We may feel mostly gratitude for our opportunity to live our life. If our life is quite hard at the moment, the dread aspect of this Great Think may also be strong. In any case, the Great Resolve to be here and be intentionally alive takes courage. Every state of Awe is an act of courage as well as an encounter that occasions dread and fascination and that may be pointed to with some Great Think of poetic creation.

Poems of Awe/Wonder

As already indicated, there are an unlimited number of different states of Awe, each of which can be described in many ways. One interesting way of describing the broad spectrum of Awe experiences can be found in some poetry about living in a Land of Mystery. Joe Mathews, my teacher of many years, discovered the following poetry in Oriental culture and with help for others expanded it into some very interesting charts and spins. Here is my simple poetic sentence summary of this "chart" of the overall scope of Awe that it charts: *We live in a Land of Mystery that contains a flowing River of Consciousness, a huge Mountain of Care, and a wild Sea of Tranquility.*

Following is an expansion of the above sentence into a four-stanza poem. Each phase of this poem can be understood as a Great Think that can be attended by a Great Feel and a Great Resolve.

The Land of Mystery

We live in a Land of Mystery.
We know nothing about it.
We don't know where we have come from.
We don't know where we are going.
We don't know where we are.
We are newborn babes.
We have never been here before.
We have never seen this before.
We will never see it again.
This moment is fresh,
Unexpected,
Surprising.

As this moment moves into the past,
It cannot be fully remembered.
All memory is a creation of our minds.
And our minds cannot fathom the Land of Mystery,
much less remember it.
We experience Mystery Now
And only Now.
Any previous Now is gone forever.
Any yet-to-be Now is not yet born.
We live Now,
only Now,
in a Land of Mystery.

The River of Consciousness

Within the Land of Mystery
flows a River of Consciousness/Freedom.
Consciousness is a moisture in the desert of things,
an enigma in the Land of Mystery,
Consciousness flows through body and mind.
Our bodies are pain and pleasure,
desire, emotion, stillness, and passion.
All these are but rocks in the water
on the banks of the River of Consciousness
Consciousness is not the body,
but a flow through the body and with the body.
Consciousness is an alertness that is also
a Freedom to intend, to will, to do.
The mind is a tool of consciousness,
providing consciousness with the ability
to reflect upon consciousness itself.
But consciousness cannot be contained
within the images and symbols of the mind.
Consciousness is an enigma that mind
cannot comprehend – even noticing consciousness
is an act of consciousness using the mind and
flowing like a River in the Land of Mystery.

The Mountain of Care

Within the Land of Mystery
rises a Mountain of Care –
care for self, care for others,
care for Earth, care for the cosmos,
care that we exist, care that we suffer
care that we may find rest and fulfillment,
care that we may experience our caring
and not grow numb and dead.
It takes no effort to care.
It takes effort not to care.
Care is given with the Land of Mystery.
Care is part of the Mystery of Being.
We care, we just care, we are made of care.

Care is a Mountain because care is so huge,
so challenging to embrace, to climb, to live.
Care is a demand upon us that is more humbling,
more consuming, more humiliating,
than all the authorities, laws, and obligations
of our social existence.
Care is a forced march into the dangers
and the hard work of constructing a life that
is not a passive vegetable growth
nor a wildly aggressive obsession.
Care is an inescapable given, simply there,
yet care is also an assertion of our very being.
It is compassion, devotion, love for all that is given
and for all parts of each given thing, each being.
Like Atlas, we lift the planet day-by-day,
year-by-year, love without end,
in the Land of Mystery.

The Sea of Tranquility

In the Land of Mystery
there is a Sea of Tranquility,
a place of Rest amidst the wild waters of life.
The waves may be high, our small boat tossed about,
but there we are with a courageous heart.
It is our heart that is courageous.
We are born with this heart.
We do not achieve it.
We can simply rest within our own living heart,
our own courageous heart that opens vulnerably
to every person and all aspects of that person,
to our own self and every aspect of that self,
to life as a whole with all its terrors and joys.
This is a strange Rest, for no storm can end it,
no challenge of life defeat it,
No loss, no death, no horror of being, no fear
can touch our courageous heart.
We live, if we allow ourselves to truly live
on this wild Sea of Everything in the Tranquility
of our own indestructible courageous heart.
To manifest and fully experience this Tranquility
we only have to give up the creations of our mind
that we have substituted for this ever-present Peace.
We have only to open to the Land of Mystery
flowing with a River of Consciousness
and containing a Mountain of Care.
Here and here alone do we find the Sea of Tranquility –
Here in the Land of Mystery that our mind
cannot comprehend, create, or control.
Here beyond our deepest depth or control
is a Sea of Tranquility in the Land of Mystery.