

Cup of Stars
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Fiona Heath, Intern Minister

I should ask that each child in the world be [given] a sense of wonder so indestructible that
 it would last throughout life. *Rachel Carson*

Messenger

by Mary Oliver

My work is loving the world.
 Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird –
 equal seekers of sweetness.
 Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.
 Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?
 Am I no longer young, and still half-perfect? Let me
 keep my mind on what matters,
 which is my work,

which is mostly standing still and learning to be
 astonished.

The phoebe, the delphinium.
 The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.
 Which is mostly rejoicing, since all the ingredients are here,

which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart
 and these body-clothes,
 a mouth with which to give shouts of joy
 to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,
 telling them all, over and over, how it is
 that we live forever.

Cup of Stars

In the nineties there was a popular television show called Northern Exposure. A New York doctor is practicing in the small town of Cecily, Alaska, home of many quirky individuals.

One story focused on the plight of Princess, a crane, who had been hand raised by a young man named Ed. Princess learnt how to join with the other cranes and migrate, visiting Ed when she returns.

But Princess doesn't know how to respond to the attentions of a male seeking a mate. As cranes mate for life, this is a problem.

Local DJ Chris tells Ed he needs to teach the crane the mating dance.

And so they go out to the lake where Princess is. Ed asks what they should do, and Chris replies "dance with abandon".

And they do, flapping arms and high stepping.

The crane fans her wings.

The final scene is a long shot of Ed and Chris and crane, on the lake's shore, under tall spruces.

Framed by the still water and the green trees, men and bird dance together.

It was a scene that left me astonished with delight.

A moment of pure beauty.

I can't explain why the scene happened to fill me with such wonder.

But it did. It is an image that I have treasured for years,

The water, the trees, the men, the bird, dancing with abandon.

I know others have watched the same scene and feel nothing but mild amusement.

Wonder is very much a matter of the moment, the intersection between our own state of mind and the world beyond.

It is difficult to describe in mere words.

The English language is so limited when it comes to matters of the spirit.

And the term "wonder" itself has been softened by strange uses.

When I hear the term, what immediately comes to my mind is fluffy white bread in polka dot plastic.

It is not surprising we don't take wonder seriously.

Wonder can be child like. Wonder is foolish.
 Wonder and delight don't fit well with irony and cynicism.

And we have every reason to be ironic, to be cynical.
 We live in the strangest of times,
 where destroying jobs increases stock prices,
 where nations go bankrupt while transnational make billions.
 We sell water, our public resource, to private companies so they can sell it
 back to us in bottles at 1,000 times the cost.
 I know it will not be long before President's Choice offers us oxygen in
 handy personal containers.

Irony and cynicism have their place.
 They allow us to express our frustration with the state of the world.
 They take power away from the powerful, simply by mocking them.
 Humour helps, just watch Rick Mercer or Jon Stewart, humour helps.

But irony and cynicism aren't enough.
 Too much can lead to paralysis.
 Why bother changing a world that only gets worse with every news cycle?

We forget that how we live our lives matters.
Everything we do matters, and it matters wondrously.

When we return to wonder, we return to openness to the world,
 openness to possibility, openness to change.
 It reminds us that the world is so much greater than our small cynical
 ironic selves.
 It reminds us that we - our very selves - are so much greater too.

Scientist Rachel Carson, known for her world changing book on pesticides,
 Silent Spring, also wrote a short essay on "the sense of wonder".
 Carson believed that those who strengthen their sense of wonder,
 "who dwell...among the beauties and mysteries of the earth
 are never alone or weary of life...."
 She saw wonder as a way to develop both inner contentment

and excitement for living.

Naturalist, Brian Doyle writes that he suspects that
 “nothing could be as useful, as generative of joy and mercy,
 as energizing and refreshing, as nakedly holy,
 as a faucet of wonder that never shuts off.”

We need wonder. We need that faucet of wonder in our lives,
 in our everyday lives, to bring us to joy and mercy, to energize and refresh
 us. To bring us to back to the whole, to the memory that we belong to this
 earth.

A stance of wonder is a spiritual practice, a way of approaching the world
 with grace.

“Wonder does not exist independent in the world, waiting to be noticed.
 The world waits to be noticed but...wonder is a response,
 an attitude of mind and heart, a graced completion of a circle between
 observer and observed. Wonder is not a given; it is contingent on the habit
 of being that allows it to arise in the face of the wondrous. “
 (Haupt, Crow Planet, p. 159)

The world is a wondrous place. But only if we notice it.
 Only if we, like Jenny in the story, pay attention to the details.

Choosing wonder requires us to learn “the art of seeing” (John Burroughs).
 To learn a habit of observing the world in detail. This takes practice,
 dedication, intention. It requires time and concentration.

Naturalist Lyanda Lynn Haupt, in doing research on crows, spent several
 hours examining a dead crow.

She examined in great detail its feet, its beak,
 the quality of the feathers, how the feathers differed across the body,
 the delicacy of the wing structure.

She called this study a kind of *lectio divina*
 - the spiritual practice of contemplative reading -
 in this case *lectio corvid*, the reading of a crow.

Afterwards, she wrote that “I can never look offhandedly at a living crow again. I cannot fully describe how stepping back into normal life, I feel dizzy, trippy, and overcome by the constant, unseen intricacy of living things.”

The constant unseen intricacy of living things. To see this intricacy is to be struck by wonder.

Wonder leads to knowledge, deep knowledge that brings us closer to life, leads us to fully inhabit the places we live, to cherish the people that surround us.

By deep knowledge, I mean knowledge that lives in all our layers, not just our brains filled with information; but is intertwined with healthy emotions, bodily experiences, and spiritual understanding.

Knowledge that connects us to the whole, that is not easily dismissed or forgotten, but ties us to people and places.

This is different than knowing that Billy Crystal is hosting the Oscars.

A few weeks ago I went to the Art Gallery of Ontario and visited the Jack Chambers exhibit. Chambers, an Ontario artist, painted large, hyper realistic paintings filled with light.

In Lake Huron #4, there is mature leafy tree at the top of a grassy dune, small beneath an immensity of blue sky filled with white clouds.

Wonderstruck, I stood drinking it in.

When I was young, we lived in Sarnia, and did beach days at Pinery Provincial Park on Lake Huron.

It was the first park we took our son Silas camping.

For many years now, every July at the Pinery we camp with friends.

I have seen the sky he painted so many summers of my life.

How wonderful to see part of my story on the AGO walls.

The painting reveals a place with which my life is intertwined,

reveals it in ways both familiar and strange.

Wonder let me see it anew.

I know better now how others love Lake Huron.
And I know better how I love Lake Huron.

Writer Alice Walker says “**The more I wonder, the more I love.**”
We see things in proportion to the love we have for it.
Our children loom large while the postal carrier, not so much.
Wonder can increase our capacity to love,
which is a dangerous thing.
Loving calls us to care, to cherish, to protect, to act.

Alice also claims “Anything we love can be saved.”
And she may be right, if enough people love.
If enough people care, if enough people are willing to act,
Then change can happen.

The biggest barrier to change is not opposition but apathy.
Lack of interest, a sense of powerlessness,
leaves people more skilled in shopping than citizenship.
We live in a complicated global system which requires endless growth on a
finite world. We live amidst war and famine and pollution.
The news is bad.
And to see the world clearly, with intention and attention means to see the
brokenness. To be open to the world is to be open to pain.

This is no fun. It hurts. To work for change is to know defeat.
Giant, complicated global systems do not shift easily.
And as you work, the suffering and struggles of others become
more visible, become your own. And it hurts.
And while raging at the machine has its place,
anger is a fuel that burns hot, and fast, and burns itself out.

And so we need wonder.

We need wonder to sustain us, refresh us, remind us of the beauty of life.
We need wonder to call us to love, to call us to action.

While wonder may be a child like stance, it is not childish.
It is, in itself, a kind of wisdom.

A wisdom not much appreciated in this time and place.

We live in a society which suggests sophistication sits at marble topped tables sipping white Russians, while wonder sits at the kiddie table with Dora the Explorer. But wonder needs to sit at the big table. It doesn't need to drink White Russians, but it needs to hang out with grown ups. Or more precisely, the grown ups need to hang out with wonder.

Because in the end, inaction is far worse than action. Because then you never learn what difference you might have made. You never learn what you are capable of.

By taking positive steps to protect what we love, by acting from deep knowledge, sustaining ourselves with wonder, we can soothe our pain, we can soothe other's suffering.

And the world needs people who are willing to act.
The world needs people willing to seek change.

David Suzuki can be our inspiration.
Suzuki is a genius, a passionate and driven scientist, but what appeals to me most is how wonderstruck he is by the world. Despite the legacy of internment during the war, despite the grief of the damage done to nature, he chooses hope and action, optimism and vision, because he finds the world to be marvelous.

He finds people to be marvelous too,
assuring us that we have simply lost our way,
forgotten the old stories about belonging to the earth.

As people of the chalice, I believe we are finding our way into the new old story, belonging to earth, celebrating mystery, finding our way with wonder.

We choose a tradition of ethics, of praxis, of living daily life as if it matters.

We honour other beings' inherent worth and dignity.

We live in the knowledge of connection.
We seek justice, equity and compassion.
We choose action.
We choose to care for the chalice which holds all life.

And when the world is a difficult and painful place,
We hold the cup with tender hands, and look inside with wonder.

We might see men and cranes dancing together.
We might see leafy trees against blue sky.
We might see stars.
What we see will help transform the world.

Everything we do matters, and it matters wondrously.
May it be so.