

INSCAPE April 2015

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Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

May you always be consciously aware of the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the love and mercy of God the Father, and the communion of the Life-Giving Holy Spirit dwelling within your heart!

THE GIFT OF WONDERMENT

“O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Thy name in all the earth! Thou hast set Thy glory upon the heavens. Out of the mouth of young men and infants hast Thou established Thy glory because of Thine enemies, that Thou mightest destroy the enemy and the avenger. For Thy heavens have seen the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which Thou hast ordained; What is man, that Thou art mindful of him? And the son of man, that Thou visitest him? For Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast clothed him with glory and honor. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of Thy hands; Thou hast put all things under his feet” (Psalms 8: 1-4).

Dag Hammarskjöld, the Secretary of the United Nations, writes in his beautiful work *Markings*: “God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illuminated by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a *wonder*, the source of which is beyond all reason.”

Father Maloney believes that one of the most important gifts we need to rediscover in our Western technological world is the gift of *wonder*. Otherwise our lives become lives of hollow persons, as T. S. Eliot in 1925 prophetically described many of us who are living today: “We are the hollow men, we are the stuffed men, leaning together, headpiece filled with straw. Alas!...Shape without form, shade without color, paralyzed form, gesture without motion.”

Our lives are filled with emptiness. We live in shades of black or gray. We suppress our native ability to understand the true meaning of God in our lives and to experience him as a loving Father. We cling to the prayer of petition where we see God as an object, a Santa Claus, to give us good things, and we never move into the state of continued praise and worship out of wonder for all God does out of love for us. We take for granted God, our loved ones (until they die), the very food and drink we enjoy in abundance daily, our freedoms in our country; but above all, we take for granted the miracle of our life when we lose the gift of *wonderment*.

Yet this is the malaise of all of us moderns coming from our almost exclusively national, technological and scientific approach to life. Dr. Victor E. Frankl, the Austrian psychiatrist, confirms this sickness of almost universal meaninglessness that pervades modern society: “Effectively an ever-increasing number of our clients suffer from a feeling of interior emptiness, which I have described as existential emptiness---a feeling of total absence of a meaning to existence.”

SCIENCE VERSUS THE WORLD OF WONDERMENT

Science creates the illusion that life is a bundle of problems that can all be solved by human reason. It begins with a curiosity, as does wonder, but it remains centered on the subject's power to observe, manipulate, control, and exploit the objective world outside. For such scientists, memory and the talk of childlike wonder are throwbacks to a childish and immature view of the real world. Since religion is connected with the invisible and mysterious world of an invisible God, reached by faith, hope and love, religion is labeled with critical remarks as an enemy to true science, the only entrance to reality.

In the scientific world all puzzles can be solved. There is no need to go beyond the visible world, governed by static and universal laws that always operate with absolute certainty; hence, there is no need or even desire for wonder.

Yet wonder does not oppose scientific, analytic knowledge, but is a most important form of a different knowledge that must supplement that of human reason. We find such knowledge exalted in Holy Scripture. On every page of the Old and New Testaments, we see a radical amazement toward human history and nature due to an immanent God, all-powerful and all-wise, working in mysterious ways that lie beyond our reasoning comprehension, but are discovered by the humble and pure of heart (...they will see God).

There is found in Scripture the sense of perpetual surprise at the fact of our human existence, the existence of all creatures out of God's free creation of this amazing world of diversity in unity: "This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day which the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalms 118:23-24). Wonder is different from the curiosity that is a prelude to scientific knowledge that disappears when causes are determined and phenomena adequately explained by the investigating mind.

For the prophet, wonder is a form of thinking—a new knowledge beyond reasoning. It is an attitude that never ceases and is climaxed in Liturgical Worship (thanksgiving and sacrifice). But would you not agree that in our modern world, as technology advances, the sense of wonder declines on all levels of our human involvement, including our religious attitudes? We dry up and die psychologically and spiritually, certainly not for want and availability of information, but for want of wonder and humble appreciation for the real. Life without wonder is not worth living! We lack, not a will to believe, but to wonder!

THE UNIVERSE OF WONDER

The words and wisdom of Saint Gregory of Nyssa (4th century) are most meaningful even in our present society, "Concepts create idols. Only wonder understands."

Wonder, or radical amazement, is the prerequisite for an authentically balanced human existence. We are being confronted (communication technology by God's method) at all times everywhere in our world around us with the mystery and grandeur of God, especially in our intimate relationships with other human beings. The way of authentic true-faith leads us through acts of wonder and amazement to discover God at the heart of matter. "Hearken to this, O Job: listen and consider the wondrous works of God. Do you know what God has ordained for them, and what causes the light of his clouds to shine? Do you know the balancing of the clouds, the wondrous works of him, who is perfect in knowledge? Do you know why your garments get hot when the earth changes its position after the equinox? Were you with him when he spread out the great sky, helping him hold it up" (Job 37: 14-18)?

But wonder is first engendered into our hearts by the mystery of our sheer existence, the fact that we *are*. The Psalmist never tires of wondering at how marvelously God created him. "For thou hast made my heart; thou hast accepted me from my mother's womb. I will praise thee, because of the wonders which thou hast done; marvelous are thy works; and that my soul knows right well" (Psalms 139:13-14).

If we ignore the wonders by taking them for granted, there is no worship in our lives, no music, no dance, no surprises, no celebration, no excitement in life—in a word, no love... therefore no God! "God is Love" (1 John 4:8) by nature.

We train ourselves in wonder by exercising faith in the mystery of God's humble, but mighty and powerful love that is active in each detail of our daily lives. In all events we invoke God's name and presence, and learn to surrender to the mystery of his loving activity for us as we open up to his uncreated energies of divine love operating at each moment.

CHARACTERISTICS OF WONDER

I am sure you have had many moments when you went beyond your own rational understanding of what you were observing in a given experience and entered into this mysterious world of wonderment. Can a mother ever forget the wonder that flooded her as she held the mystery of life, her firstborn child, in her arms? How close God was to her in the wonder of the creative power to give new life out of the mother and father's mutual love that incarnates a new and eternal life of their child.

Sam Keen, in his book *Apology of Wonder*, gives us some of the characteristics of the objects that bring us into the state of wonder: "*Contingency* means that in raw experience the object we apprehend in wonder comes to us without bearing in its own explanation...wonder-events are happening, revelatory occurrences which appear, as if by chance, bearing some new meaning (value, promise) which cannot be immediately integrated into a past pattern of understanding and explanation."

Another characteristic other than contingency is that of *mystery*. Gabriel Marcel gives us the distinction between problem and mystery. In a problem situation (such as science) there is a subject and object relationship, an *I-it*. But in the mystery of wonder there is an *I-thou* relationship. There is an openness to oneness-in-union and no longer a subject distancing him/herself from the object "over there." Birth in all its phases of conception, pregnancy, birth-giving and nurturing new life can be analyzed, yet the net result of a new living person is a product of wonderment that cannot be captured solely in scientific, objective, universal terms. The knower and the known, form a living and personalistic relationship.

Another characteristic of wonder is that of *presence*. When you open up to the uniqueness of an orchid or rose (which you may have looked at many times before you distanced yourself as a subject looking at an object), to *really* look at it, you enter into the element of presence so essential in the gift of wonder. In wonder we are, as it were, grasped by the object that seemingly initiates the encounter.

As subject you are no longer the primary, aggressive actor. Reality is charged with a personalistic, conscious relationship between two creatures. To be present to the uniqueness of every creature—be it a plant, animal, or human being—is to open yourself to the other, no longer as a mere object, but now as almost the receptacle of another consciousness, at least of the participated beauty of the Creator in the unique creature.

WONDER IS ALWAYS A SURPRISE

For those who experience wonder, it is always a surprise that dramatically bursts upon us with a suddenness that produces in us amazement or astonishment. We cannot create wonder because we cannot create for ourselves something that will surprise us. We cannot control it since it is a gift we cannot actively bring about or manipulate. Such an experience, such as contemplating God's beauty in a special kaleidoscope spangling in the west (sunset) of a burst of ever-changing colors, reduces us, in its suddenness and gentle power, to lift us outside ourselves and our habitual, rational ways of perceiving the world around us, to a sense of silence. God's Sacredness and Holiness melt into each other as we move into awe and reverence before God's beauty and power in such a silent openness in adoration of the Divine Maker of all beauty.

An accompanying effect upon us is a mental or emotional sense of "dis-ease," of not being at ease, not being in control of the situation. Hopefully, all of us have experienced this emotion when we discovered a deep love that united us with another person. A new dimension of meaning was being revealed to us that challenged our habitual, rational control of a given situation. We ask new questions in such a dis-ease situation. New life is bursting all over the

skies of our consciousness and unconsciousness, and we come alive with a new excitement in the presence of God as love. When we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is being perfected in us (1 John 4-12).

DEATH-RESURRECTION

Basically we all fear the unknown. Is this not why we anxiously and rigidly plan our daily activities to keep the unexpected and unexplainable to a minimum? We prefer being an old wineskin, no longer able to stretch when the new wine is poured into us, and it ferments. Thus we seek to “domesticate” our world around us. We wish no strangeness, no challenges, no crosses, no trials, no risks! We all basically long for surprises, new loves, new experiences, new challenges, but we also fear letting go of the familiar and of our habitual control over the familiar.

In an event of wonder that fills us with delight and pleasure, there is always a pleasant surprise that presents us with a situation of dignity, new values. But in wonder we must abandon the aggressive self-control since we must allow others simply to be and ourselves to rejoice in their unique presence. We touch the inviolable strangeness but uniqueness in the other, and doing so, we touch God’s wonderful, sacred presence as the self-emptying Gift of Love to us.

Thus we encounter the cross and the call to embrace a cognitive dying to our illusions that our full authenticity as a human being can continue to create our own worlds and persons and even God without a death. This is the way Jesus lived his earthly life. It tells us that if we wish to have a part with him, we too must live according to this universal law implicit in the wonder-experience. If you wish to live an authentic, human life as a person through relationships, living fully unto God’s glory, you must lose your former way of viewing the world exclusively from your own self-centeredness. But if you hold on to that optic and exclude wonder in your life, you will surely lose your life as an authentically and fully alive, unique person. “Grant me compunction and contrition of heart, humility in my thoughts, and a release from the slavery of my own reasoning” (Thanksgiving Prayer of Saint Cyril of Alexandria to the Mother of God).

MOVING INTO CONTEMPLATION

When we surrender to the experience of wonder, there is always a movement into contemplation, away from the exclusive, rational mode of relating to God and neighbor. The characteristic of contemplation is basically a new openness through a disciplined silence of our rational powers to allow the “other” to speak, to reveal itself or themselves to us in all their uniqueness and inner beauty. With human beings and God there is an attentive listening to understand and experience that person as a gift to us.

In contemplating the “other” we move into a receptive passivity that shows itself in the relinquishing of our own activity as the prime source of all reality. We open up in an active receptivity to the uniqueness of the other person. Contemplation seeks to go beyond the fixedness in the already-known to be relaxed in receiving with reverence from the other. Humility is demanded and a willingness to appreciate new riches that come to us in our emptiness of rational power to control outside objects.

Such a “Passover” experience in wonder brings to us a sense of delight and enjoyment of new-found enrichment. The seed dies and brings forth a hundredfold. Out of amazement and admiration there grows gratitude for the gift being given to us. Such gratitude leads us toward celebration of our new-found richness, the new release of life and beauty. Toward God we move in worship and reverence and awe as we enter the experience of his holiness as self-giving, as *Suffering Servant* and *Giver*. It calls us to celebrate in worship, not merely in words

of praise, but in actual oblation (free-will offering) of ourselves back to God as suffering servant and giver in Christ Jesus. There can be no substantial difference between wonder and the experience of the holy.

BECOMING LIKE LITTLE CHILDREN

Jesus taught us in the Good News of the Gospel the need for such wonder by calling us to a conversion to become like little children. “At that very hour the disciples came up to Jesus and said, who is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven? So Jesus called a little child, and made him stand up in the midst of them. And he said, Truly I say to you, unless you change and become like little children, you shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Whoever therefore will humble himself like this little child, shall be great in the Kingdom of Heaven. And he who will welcome one like this little child, in my name, welcomes me” (Matthew 18: 1-5).

Children have the ability to find sustained and continued delight in a state of marvel and amazement. The life of a healthy child manifests a freshness and anticipation and openness to the present moment that holds out the possibility of a child always being ready for a happy surprise. Sam Keen (noted American author, professor, and philosopher), describes the world from a healthy child’s viewpoint: “the world is a surprise party, planned just for me, and my one vocation in life is to enjoy it to the fullest—such is the implicit creed of the wondering child...to wonder is to live in the world of novelty rather than law, of delight rather than obligation, and of the present rather than the future.”

God’s revelation of his reality in self-giving and his immanence to us at all times through his uncreated energy of love is the basis for our true faith upon which we build the wonderment of a child at all times before its heavenly Father. Retaining this true filiation as a child of God and therefore an heir to the heavenly kingdom, we are called also to be mature adults who can enjoy an even greater sense of wonder through the gift of the Holy Spirit. We can enjoy a greater openness to God’s amazing humility and love in his creation of this universe (cosmos, beautiful harmony of God’s economy), in the perfect gift of his incarnate Word Jesus Christ, indwelling us through his Holy Spirit. When our wonder before the triune God becomes an habitual attitude giving us new eyes and ears of faith, then we will understand that true wonder leads always to true worship (Orthodoxia) of God. Then the words of D. H. Lawrence (English novelist; his collected works represent an extended reflection upon the dehumanizing effects of modernity and industrialization) will become a reality: “The sense of wonder, that is our sixth sense. And it is the natural religious sense.” In a spirit, therefore, of wonder, let us seek to describe what is this *heart* we are speaking about. Let us remain like little children, not eager to define the human heart in rational terms clear to all thinking persons. Let us, rather, wonder at the mystery of the human heart that has its own reasons and logic not known to anybody but to converted children. In next month’s *Inscape*, we will begin to enter into the mystical consciousness...what does heart mean?

“As Simeon drew near to the time of his departure from this world of error, he received you as an infant in his arms. But he knew you to be perfect God, and, struck with *wonder* at your ineffable wisdom, he cried: Alleluia” (Akathist Hymn to the Most Holy Mother of God).

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10)

Sincerely in Christ’s love for all of mankind,

Fr. John Michael Zboyovski