



# WONDER

*living life in utter amazement*

Br. Curtis Almquist, SSJE

YOU NEED NOT GO ELSEWHERE TO DISCOVER WONDER: to dream and delight, to be astonished and grateful for the sheer joy of being alive. Watch a child take in life to be reminded how living in wonder is an innate gift. G. K. Chesterton said, "The sun rises every morning not only because of the natural laws of science, but because, like a small child, God squeals with delight over routine and tells the sun to 'do it again!'" Wonder is to be found in the ordinary.

The experience of wonder is within the reach of your senses and memory, now. You need only pay attention: Laugh at squirrels. Gaze at flower petals in their most intricate colors, and forms, and fragrances. Eat slowly enough to guess the spices. Listen for the oboe at the symphony. Watch your cat watching; scratch your dog's chest. Experience what good architecture does for your soul. Notice the difference in color between the light of dawn and the light of dusk. Notice how shadows make life so much more interesting. Wink at yourself in the mirror. Hum. Turn off your radio or iPod and hum. Hum from memory; hum up something new. Watch children playing. Revere your body as a miracle and delight in what your body can do, what your hands can do, what your fingers can do, what your index finger can do. How many things can your index finger do? Listen for birds and choose your favorite bird call, your favorite that day. Recall the road less traveled that you have taken that has made all the difference. Say "thank you" at least a dozen times a day. Take a sip of tea, and put your tea cup down; when you're ready, take another sip. Find an outdoor fountain and watch the flow of water. Repeat after me: "rubber baby buggy bumpers," or make up your own tongue twister and try it out at a dinner party. Close your eyes and fly like you could when you were a child. Retrieve something old, something that you had almost forgotten. Create something new. Remember who it was, that first person who got through to you, who convinced you that you could do it. Reclaim your most notorious failures, and what good has come out of them. Find something that makes you laugh. Go to a museum and visit one gallery, one only, and stay until you've learned the secret you need to know. Remember your first love.

Remember what brings tears to your eyes; remember who brings tears to your eyes. Why is that?

On I could go. On you could go, and you should. Live the miracle of your life, each passing moment. Take nothing for granted; take everything for gratitude. Recognize that the Creator of life – the life that surrounds you and the life that fills you – has given you a life to share delight and wonder and utter amazement. In the beginning, God created life, and it was good, so good, so amazingly good, that God could not help but share it... with you.

Life is a *panentheistic* experience, that is, everything in the whole of creation reveals the traces of God. Hildegard of Bingen, the great 12<sup>th</sup>-century Benedictine abbess, described creation as a collection of “mirrors” that God has made to reflect the wonder of God’s glory. The whole of creation is iconic, a window to God. God’s intention is that we be wonderfully caught up in the traces of God’s glory that fill us and surround us.

For some of us, it may have taken the experience of sickness – ours or someone else’s – to awaken our awareness of the absolute miracle of own body and mind, and the preciousness and beauty of life. Don’t wait to be sick to be reminded of wonder! Live your life, from the inside out, as a marvel to behold. John Cassian, a fourth-century Egyptian monk, said “we must be fully awake to the wonder and beauty of our being, to the mystery of the personal life of Jesus in our heart.”

While wonder is all around us, alive within us, and ready at any moment to be cherished, the monastic tradition upholds two practices as especially helpful in opening doorways to wonder: contentment and silence. The English word “contentment” comes from the Latin *contentus*, “contained,” “satisfied.” We live in a culture in which we are considered “consumers,” in a market economy constantly alluring us with *dissatisfaction*. We are taught that what is next, or what is new, is better than what is now. Not so. An ancient monastic principle teaches that the freedom to be fully alive is found in the context of limitation. You cannot have it all, nor should you. To be content is to engage with the wonder of life that is now. Grow your soul downward, deeper, into the ground of your being. Don’t just be virtually present to life; be really present, which is where you will experience God’s real presence, in the wonder of now.

Likewise, claiming moments of silence in the course of each day will invite your being really present to the wonder of life. Silence is like punctuation for the soul, otherwise life can be gibberish, like a run-on sentence that has no meaning. Silence is like the rests in music. Without the rests, there would be just a cacophony, not music. Being silent and still will bring the wonder of life into focus, lest life otherwise only be a blur. The SSJE *Rule of Life* values “the silence of adoring love for the mystery of God which words cannot express. In

silence we pass through the bounds of language to lose ourselves in wonder.”<sup>1</sup> Incorporate some silence and stillness in the cadence of your day to help you take in the grandeur of life, the panoply of God’s splendor. Life is wondrous. Stop. Look. Listen.

Not all of life is wonderful. Some days are crushing. The experience of wonder can be very elusive in the face of suffering, injustice, loss, and death. And yet, you can feel more than one thing at a time. Being attentive to the wonder of life will counterbalance what is *not* wonderful and will make a world of difference to you. In the best of times and in the worst of times, opening the door of your soul to wonder will help you pray your life, your amazing life, with hope and zeal.

*May none of God’s wonderful works keep silence, night or morning. Bright stars, high mountains, the depths of the seas, sources of rushing rivers: may all these break into song as we sing to Father, Son and Holy Spirit. May all the angels in the heavens reply: Amen, amen, amen. Power, praise, honor, eternal glory to God, the only Giver of grace, Amen, amen, amen. – Anon., 3rd century*

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1 SSJE Rule of Life, Chap. 27: “Silence”

**Br. Curtis Almquist** came to SSJE in 1987, having served previously as a parish priest. He was the Superior 2001-2010 and now lives at Emery House, the Society’s rural monastery. He recently celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of his profession in the Society.

## QUOTES *to ponder*

Every blade of grass has its angel that bends over it and whispers, "Grow, grow."

– *The Talmud (5th century, C.E.)*

Holy Spirit  
giving life to all life,  
moving all creatures,  
root of all things,  
washing them clean,  
wiping out their mistakes,  
healing their wounds,  
you are our true life,  
luminous, wonderful,  
awakening the heart  
from its ancient sleep.

– *Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), German abbess*

To pray is to take notice of the wonder, to regain a sense of the mystery that animates all beings. Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living... our gratefulness for witnessing the wonder, for the gift of our unearned right to serve, to adore, and to fulfill.

– *Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972), American rabbi and theologian*

Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

– *Philippians 4:8*

i thank You God for most this amazing  
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees  
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything  
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,  
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth  
day of life and love and wings: and of the gay  
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing  
breathing any—lifted from the no  
of all nothing—human merely being  
doubt unimaginably You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and  
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

– e. e. cummings (1894-1962), American poet

## PRACTICES *to try*

Wake up surprised, thankful, and attuned to the wonder of being alive. Don't miss a moment of life's splendor! (*I begin each day with a gentle touch of greeting to our plants and flowers as I pass by.*)

God has created you with a will, and with the capacity to desire. Rather than using your gift of desire to focus onto something you *don't* have, use your desire to claim and cherish what you *do* have, i.e.: *this* is what I want, *this* is what I need, *this* is what I have been given. Be attentive and grateful for now. Behold the wonder of now.

Use your gift of sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste to be singularly focused on one thing, e.g., with the taste of food, with a piece of artwork, with a sole instrument in the orchestra, with something alive in the created world. Focus; absorb; delight; adore. (*I particularly enjoy taking very close-up, "micro-photos" of flowers, birds, and bees.*)

## QUESTIONS *to consider*

When you were young, what filled you with wonder and delight? Go back in your memory and reclaim that experience. If you were to “copy and paste” that experience into the present, what would it be now? Whatever you can remember is still alive in your soul.

What is your life story? Tell the story to yourself. *Once upon a time there was this little boy, or this little girl. And she lived in...* (Where did she live?) *She always felt that...* (What did she feel?) *When she heard...* *When she saw...* *When she smelled...* (What was it?) *There were some big people in her life.* (Who were they? Were they good? Were they bad? Were they silly? Were they frightening?) *She always felt safe and loved by...* (Who was this? Was it a stuffed animal or a pet? Was it your grandmother?) *And she decided, “When I grow up, I am going to...”* (What? What did you want never to happen again? What did you want to happen always? Who were you going to be and become?) Just keep telling yourself that story until you come to now. And this is what will happen. You will be reminded of how miraculous your life really is. And you will realize that somewhere along the way God broke through to you. Somehow the story you are telling about your life is what God whispered into your ear about what your life is to be about. Pick up that story line again: the absolute, amazing wonder of your own life script.

## RESOURCES *to explore*

“A Song of Creation” in *The Book of Common Prayer*, pp. 88-90.

*Upstream: Selected Essays*, by Mary Oliver.

*I Asked for Wonder; A Spiritual Anthology*, by Abraham Joshua Heschel.

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