

Dangerous Wonder

*We cover our deep ignorance with words,
but we are ashamed to wonder; we are afraid
to whisper "mystery."¹*

*Sometimes I think the people to feel saddest for
are people who once knew what profoundness was,
but who lost or became numb to the sensation of wonder.²*

*We live in a time when faith is thin,
because our aching for what is above and
beyond us has been anaesthetized and our capacity
for wonder reduced to clever tricks.³*

It was one of those snowfalls you never forget. Millions of white flakes filled the air, quieting the earth and swallowing the sounds. The resulting silence was thick with a texture you could feel.

My nephew stood in the living room at the opening to our deck, a stranger to snow, his two years of life about to be altered irrevocably. His eyes were blank, unaware; his body clueless; his mind about to be overloaded with the electricity of discovery.

In the dark, Mother had maneuvered herself onto the deck's two feet of snow to capture the event on video. Dad manned the

sliding door, which had been unlatched for quick opening into the darkness. Uncle's hands were poised on the switch to light the deck. And Aunt was ready to lift her nephew into the mysterious new world of twinkling ice and frozen softness.

The moment arrived.

In a perfectly timed instant the deck lights went on, the camera started recording, the sliding door swept open, and a two-year-old was transported from the world he knew to a world he had never seen.

Wonder filled the air.

His eyes stretched wide with astonishment, as though the only way to apprehend what he was seeing was for his eyes to become big enough to *contain it all*. He stood motionless, paralyzed. It was too much for a two-year-old, too much for an any-year-old (too often, when a person gets older, the person's "too-much detector" malfunctions, corroded by busyness and technology). He twitched and jerked each time a snowflake landed on his face, feeling it tingle as it was transformed from hostile cold to friendly warmth, caressing his face with tiny droplets of water. Just behind his large eyes you could see sparks flying from the crosscurrents of millions of electric stimuli overwhelming the circuit breakers of his previously small world. His mind was a confusion of strange, conflicting realities: *white, cold, floating, flying, tingling, electric, landing, touching, sparkling, melting*—causing an overload so great, so overwhelming, he fell backward—a slow-motion landing in the billowy whiteness, the snow tenderly embracing him. He had given up trying to understand snow and had given in to *experiencing* snow.

It was a moment of *wonder*.

The more I think about it, it was a moment of *dangerous* wonder. My nephew's awe and wonder caused him to surrender to the snow by falling into it. For a few magical seconds, the *danger* of snow had

given way to the *wonder* of snow. For a brief moment my nephew came face-to-face with life at its fullest. He didn't know whether to cry or laugh, to be afraid or happy. My nephew experienced what it must have been like that first moment in Eden when Adam and Eve's eyes could not comprehend the staggering beauty of God's new creation. He experienced what it must have been like when the scales fell from the blind man's eyes and the explosion of color and shapes bombarded his mind for the first time; when the leper felt a surge of electricity through his body, his dead and rotting skin suddenly transformed into the fresh skin of a baby; when the bitter, hopeless prostitute looked up fully expecting judgment and death and instead heard the words of forgiveness and life.

What moments! What holy moments! To be in the presence of God, frightened and amazed at the same time! To feel as if you are in the presence of Life itself, yet with your soul shaking in both terror and gratitude.

I want a lifetime of holy moments. Every day I want to be in dangerous proximity to Jesus. I long for a life that explodes with meaning and is filled with adventure, wonder, risk, and *danger*. I long for a faith that is gloriously treacherous. I want to be with Jesus, not knowing whether to cry or laugh.

If I'm honest, most of my longings have been unfulfilled, and my living, very *untreacherous* . . . until a few years ago.

In 1991, my wife and I spent a week in a L'Arche community called Daybreak, where the majority of the members of the community are mentally and physically challenged. Many times during our stay, people in the community reminded me of little children. They were childlike. And what surprised me was how much the L'Arche community taught me about Jesus. I shouldn't have been surprised. Matthew 18:3 describes an incident in Jesus' life when He called a little child to come close to Him and then said to the adults

in the audience, “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” *It was true.* This wonderful community of people—who had *not* had their childlike attributes taken from them—gently guided me back to the place of danger and wonder.

What would happen if we all took Jesus’ advice and “became like little children”—like my nephew? Is dangerous wonder a possibility for you and me? I believe it is. Why, then, don’t more of us experience life in this way? Because we allow obstacles to squelch our wonder and steal our souls.

THE OBSTACLE OF DULLNESS

Episcopal priest Robert Capon named the first obstacle: “We are in a war between dullness and astonishment.”⁴ The most critical issue facing Christians is not abortion, pornography, the disintegration of the family, moral absolutes, MTV, drugs, racism, sexuality, or school prayer. *The critical issue today is dullness.* We have lost our astonishment. The Good News is no longer good news, it is okay news. Christianity is no longer life *changing*, it is life *enhancing*. Jesus doesn’t change people into wild-eyed radicals anymore, He changes them into “nice people.”

If Christianity is simply about being nice, I’m not interested.

What happened to radical Christianity, the un-nice brand of Christianity that turned the world upside-down? What happened to the category-smashing, life-threatening, anti-institutional gospel that spread through the first century like wildfire and was considered (by those in power) *dangerous*? What happened to the kind of Christians whose hearts were on fire, who had no fear, who spoke the truth no matter what the consequence, who made the world uncomfortable, who were willing to follow Jesus wherever He