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We Must Wonder

Last summer, I made a habit of opening the window in my room and climbing out onto the roof above our porch. After my parents had gone to sleep, I would peer through the window at the sky to see if it was a clear night. Opening the window and removing the screen was annoying to do and was never as quiet as I'd like it to be, but the result was access to my favorite place on earth. The roof outside my room isn't very steep, but I was always careful when stepping outside and often used my hands to stabilize myself. I'd sit down, get out my earbuds, put on a specific playlist, and look up at the stars. I watched as moonlit clouds drifted across the sky and connected the stars to make simple constellations in my mind. I did this many summer nights, less so once school started, and stopped when it got too cold. Every time I felt a strange feeling of independence, loneliness, peace, and most importantly, wonder.

I've never felt a stronger sense of wonder than sitting on that roof, so whenever the topic comes up, I try to share my experience with others in hopes of invoking a sliver of that feeling in them. Those stargazing sessions convinced me that wonder is an incredibly important part of the human experience, as they opened my mind up to self-reflection and appreciation for the world I live in. I started to realize why mankind has made an effort to see new landscapes, explore the bottom of the ocean, discover entire ecosystems under our microscopes, and send spacecraft incomprehensibly far away from our home planet: wonder is vital for human progress.

Defining wonder is a nearly impossible task, but that didn't stop Merriam-Webster from giving it their best shot. Their entry "wonder" defines the noun form as "rapt attention or astonishment at something awesomely mysterious or new to one's experience" (def. 3a). Also listed are "to feel curiosity or doubt" (def. 2) and "effective or efficient far beyond anything previously known or anticipated," (def. 3b) for its verb and adjective forms, respectively. The various parts of speech in which wonder can be used are closely related, as all allude to the unknown. One can feel wonder while looking through a microscope, wonder what exactly they are looking at, and describe the microscope itself as a "wonder tool" due to the massive, incomprehensible change in perspective it provides. Since wonder is closely tied to the unknown, it is essential for describing those especially significant experiences which require a different perspective. You have probably seen countless trees in your life (if not, I'd highly recommend sitting under one, they're pretty neat), so you know they look more or less the same. They have roots, a trunk, branches and leaves. However, when you look at the cell structure of a leaf through a microscope, then back at the rest of the tree with your own eyes, you experience wonder at the complexity of life.

Before discussing the role wonder has on human progress, I'd like to clarify its meaning even further. According to Thesaurus.com, the word wonder is similar to admiration, awe, fascination, curiosity, doubt, and most interestingly, fear. Wonder is typically used with a positive connotation, but some of its synonyms—such as doubt and fear—suggest it can be negative. It's actually not very surprising for a word closely tied to the unknown to also be associated with fear and doubt. Consider one of the most well-known stories in the Holy Bible, the story of the Nativity. Specifically, the appearance of the angel to the shepherds. According to the New International Version, "An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the

Lord shone around them, and they were terrified,” (Luke 2:9). Witnessing an angel descending from the heavens must be one of the most wonderful and terrifying things a human can experience. However, despite being terrified from the experience, the shepherds would hurry off to Bethlehem, to witness the birth of the Messiah.

The drive that the shepherds obtained through fear is something we experience every day, believe it or not. In fact, some of our worst fears can push us to live our best lives. People fear failure because it makes goals fall into uncertainty, they fear others because they don't know others' intentions, and they fear death because they don't know what lies beyond. However, these fears motivate us to live our lives. Failure makes us learn and motivates us to do better. When we learn to trust others, we develop deep friendships and beautiful relationships. Death makes us appreciate the life we have. Without that fear, and without that doubt, the wonder of life becomes meaningless.

According to Albert Einstein, life doesn't just become meaningless without wonder. The theoretical physicist once said, “He who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe is as good as dead; his eyes are closed.” (“Albert Einstein Quotes”). Here, Einstein suggests that wonder is fundamental to human life, and one can't be considered “alive” without it. While Einstein is praised as a genius all over the world, I'd also like to consult the wisest person I personally know. Mr. Haders is my highschool art teacher, and his substantial experience is shown by the fact that he has taught other multiple art teachers in my area. While he is a great artist, what makes his class so influential is the environment he creates and the life lessons he teaches through art. When I asked him about the value of wonder, one of the things he told me was that his biggest fear is being dead while he is alive. Without wonder, there's a lack of growth, and one really misses the depth of life. I then asked him if wonder decreases after

childhood. “Actually, I think it’s the opposite,” he told me. So many experiences as a child are wonderful because they are first time experiences, however, as a teacher he got more excited about being an involved part of thousands of students’ lives.

Both Albert Einstein and my art teacher pointed out that there’s more to being “alive” than living in the literal sense. Many people know this at least subconsciously because of the often monotonous nature of life. Spending huge proportions of one’s time at school or work while having few new experiences or personal growth is especially common in our society, leaving many depressed and isolated. As a high school student, I can see how school provides little experiences of wonder to teenagers. The beige brick walls that surround me for eight hours a day just make me want to return to my bed that I had begrudgingly left that morning. When Mr. Haders told me his biggest fear, I realized that, to some extent, I was living in it.

Despite the monotonous nature of many of our lives, there’s an endless world filled with mysteries just waiting to be scrutinized. So far, I’ve only discussed these opportunities of wonder impacting the individual. Wonder, however, is great for connecting people. A prime example of this is how an odd phenomenon strengthened the community of the Linville Gorge region in North Carolina. An article titled “The Mysterious Brown Mountain Lights' ' explains the lights as having “been reported as being white, red, yellow, orange and blue. They've been described looking like large balls of fire to small candle lights and from floating near the ground to rising up high into the sky.” Explanations for the lights have been offered up for as long as people have spotted them, from a Cherokee legend, to flammable nitrous vapors, to locomotive headlights (Jackson). However, since nobody could prove these theories to be true, the lights remain a mystery, one passed down for generations in the Linville Gorge region. People come from far and wide to see it for themselves and listen to the locals’ stories. Without the brown mountain

lights, this specific area of Appalachian wilderness would be known by almost nobody. As shown by the brown mountain lights, if community and local culture are to be valued, the wonder that strengthens it is to be valued too.

Another, much more superficial use for the connective properties of wonder can be found right on TV. We all yearn for the great and unknown, so it was inevitable that companies would use that feeling to appeal to consumers. With one advertisement, Jeep uses shots of grand landscapes and language like, “Make this the summer you ... discovered the best trails aren't the ones you find, they're the ones you create,” associating Jeeps with discovery, adventure, and wonder. The directors of this commercial obviously know the power of wonder and what people are willing to do to obtain it. If buying a Jeep and taking a road trip to the middle of nowhere is really what it takes to experience something more, then getting a Jeep sounds a lot more appealing. Sure, nobody is that easily convinced by an ad, but by analyzing where the director's head is, it tells us something about the value of wonder.

Of course, I've stated time and time again that we value wonder. However, there's an even more rudimentary question I have yet to answer. Why is wonder so special to give us this purpose and connection? Because wonder invokes happiness. For example, the Romantic poet, William Wordsworth, describes the happiness golden daffodils give him. His poem, titled “I wandered as lonely as a cloud,” is a clear expression of wonder at nature. The poem states that, “In such a jocund company...my heart with pleasure fills, / And dances with the Daffodils.” To Wordsworth at least, wonder and joy seem to go hand in hand. While it's unclear if joy invokes wonder, he indicates that wonder invokes joy. To get a better understanding of this relationship, I asked my brother, Ethan Swanson, a missionary with the Fellowship of Catholic University Students. Specifically, I asked him about how becoming a missionary affected his life through

wonder. He told me that before he joined FOCUS, he didn't experience much wonder. "It's a lack of finding joy in life that is freely available to you, and not having it allows for falling into despair," he explained. Once he became deeply involved with his faith, however, his wonder of God frequently moved him to tears. It seems to me that seeking and experiencing wonder is the most effective way to achieve happiness, and what else do we live for other than happiness?

Happiness is great and all, but what really matters for human progress is action. The fear, community, and happiness that wonder fuels can inspire people to do amazing things. In John Green's *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, he recounts the discovery of the Lascaux cave paintings. A man named Marcel Ravidat was looking for his dog when he and a few friends found a cave full of prehistoric paintings. Marcel and his friend Joseph "were so profoundly moved by the paintings that all through that fall and winter, they camped outside to protect it." (37) In this case, wonder moved people to put their lives on hold in order to protect something they thought was beautiful. Imagine just stumbling upon something that changes your whole life by giving you an entirely new sense of purpose. Wondrous events like these are the reason people change the world.

We don't just need wonder to change the world, we need wonder to keep it. A wonderful example of this is the plot of *Interstellar*. In this movie, earth is slowly dying, and food production is a major concern. Cooper, the movie's protagonist, had to attend a parent-teacher meeting regarding his daughter, who was a student at the school. The teachers essentially tell Cooper that because of the food shortage, his kids should become farmers, and nothing more. Back home, he expresses his discontent for the stigma against exploring new options, saying, "We used to look up at the sky and wonder at our place in the stars. Now we just look down, and worry about our place in the dirt." (Nolan). *Interstellar* is an example of how refusing to follow

our scene of wonder can hurt us in the long run. Because Earth's climate is only getting worse in the movie, the true best action for humanity to take is to venture beyond it in search for answers. However, in the movie there is a stigma surrounding space travel, portraying it as a waste of time and resources. Schools even use textbooks that say the moon landings were faked in order to trick the USSR into wasting resources in the space race, which is itself a kind of anti-wonder propaganda. The truth is, we need wonder to survive and persevere against new challenges.

As technology continues to improve, we gain the ability to search deeper for answers. On Christmas of 2021, humanity launched “the most powerful space observatory yet built,” into space. The James Webb Space Telescope is the successor to the Hubble Telescope and was collaborated on by NASA and two other space agencies. The JWST can pick up light from billions of light years away, (which is therefore billions of years old) giving us a “new vision of the universe and a view of the universe as it once appeared new.” (Overbye). I think that the fact that we built a 10 billion dollar telescope says a lot about how wonder affects our priorities. Mankind may have fought wars for all of written history, but we have looked up at the sky with wonder for just as long. Way out there, somewhere in the stars, lies the answers to our questions about the universe. And for that reason, I think the James Webb Space Telescope was worth every penny.

As I am writing this paper, the weather is starting to get warmer again. It's late February, and some warmer air is beginning to grace us with its presence. Soon, maybe tomorrow, I'll be able to comfortably sit outside my window on a clear night, peering into the depths of space. It's there, on my rooftop, far away from other people, that I feel so connected. Nothing else seems to matter when the moonlight reflects off the clouds, thus hitting my eyes and filling me with a comforting sense of wonder.

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