



Desert Creek House
802 Desert Creek Road - Numbugga
BEGA - NSW 2550 - AUSTRALIA

Phone/Fax: ++61 (0)2 6492 8498
E-mail: yumorsier@optusnet.com.au

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Wonder: a Way to God

Welcome and Presentation

The heart of religion is awe and wonder. This is the sentiment the saint shares with the unwittingly religious - scientists, artists, gardeners, carers, cooks, etc. - all who say 'I wonder'. Our inspiration for this afternoon comes from Fr. Eugene Stockton, who is a Catholic priest, now hermit, in the Blue Mountains, a scripture scholar, archaeologist, and friend of Aboriginal cultures. He has written a book with the title of today's retreat; this is unfortunately now out of print. We would like to start our afternoon today, by each one of us taking a piece of paper and answering playfully the question: "What is wondering for me: how do I do it and why?" We'll take just a few minutes to do this. Don't labour too much over it but just write down what comes into your mind.

Prayer: Psalm 104

1. Wondering in a Wonder-full World

The topic this afternoon lends itself to playfulness: Wonder as *a* way to God, not *the* way. Is God the *end* to where the Path is leading us, or also *the way* itself? Whereas the word 'wonder' points to feeling awe, surprise, excitement, the word 'wandering' in my dictionary is explained as: "go from country to country or from place to place without settled routine or aim". So one thing we are invited to do this afternoon is to wander in an alert but free (aimless if you like), way in wonder and awe. "We are going to be wandering in wonder", and "There is a wonder about wandering."

Let's now read what we have written. Take a piece of paper that isn't yours and read it to the group.

Text: Is. 43:18-19

*"Remember not the former things,
nor consider the things of old.
Behold I am doing a new thing;
Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"*

and Pope John Paul II in Canberra 1986

“Behold this vast continent! It is your home!

The place of your joys and pains,

your endeavours and your hopes!

And for all of you Australians,

the Way to the Father’s house passes through this land.

Jesus Christ is the way.....

*Everything that meets our gaze is a parable veiling and unveiling
its higher meaning.”*

The words of the late Pope invite us to find the Divine deep within creation, and in every part of creation. I discover in each wonder of creation an *angellos* (*Gk. for angel*, a messenger of God). Each is sacrament and icon of God. That is, each is channelling the divine, opening out to the divine. It is a mystery, in the sense of the Greek *mysterion* (or its Latin equivalent *sacramentum*), that is a reality partly concealing and partly revealing deeper Reality. Through the wonders of creation is filtered the Wonder of the Creator shining through all that is made.

In the presence of such wonders, we are invited to contemplate the World in a fresh and new way: a deep listening, a silent awareness, a quiet stillness so that the Divine present in all creation can draw each one of us out in wonder, draw us out and unhurriedly beckon us into the future. According to Aboriginal intuition, the land and all within it is alive, conscious and aware. I can engage with this awareness, and out of this mutual attentiveness I can learn to sense a harmony, a cosmic wholeness, as it responds to my awareness, a totality that is still, alert, listening, waiting, knowing, loving.

Ex. 1: Staying where you are, I invite you to quietly sit and focus on the soft feel and sound of your breath, the rising and falling of your chest and when you are truly in touch with that, expand your awareness to all of the sounds outside of yourself, loud or subtle, that you can hear and just allow yourself to sink into them. **(5 mins)**

Practising Christians often wonder these days about where the Church is going. When we try to read the signs of the times in our age regarding the working of the Spirit, we can quite clearly discern this change of focus from social to environmental justice; from redemption theology to creation theology. Just some examples:

- A recent Catholic Bishops Conference was entitled “Christians and Duties towards Nature”.
- Pope John Paul’s emphasis during his 1986 and 1995 visits to Australia on the Land.
- The ecological movement demanding a change of priorities and practical deeds of all people loving God’s creation.
- There is evidence that there exists enormous spiritual hunger amongst people not necessarily part of any organised church, often expressed in diverse beliefs known as New Age; and a sort of natural mysticism through bushwalking, surfing, gardening, etc.
- Many mainstream Christians in Australia want to bring the “Great Southland of the Spirit” into their spirituality as if to complete the voyage that their ancestors had done physically when they came here, in a kind of “coming spiritually home to the Land”.
- With this last focus, interest in the way how the Aboriginal views the land has grown. Aboriginal spirituality seeks a feeling of oneness with the environment.
- There is an amazing convergence in many areas of science and theology. With Quantum Physics the world is no longer viewed as distinct objects floating in space, but as interconnected energetic patterns. Reality, including ourselves, has a dual nature: we are particle and wave.

All these signs are leading us to the prospect of reaching out to God through our own environment, of seeking the face of God in our own land. We all yearn to experience a sense of oneness with ourselves, with the world, with the universe, with God. The setting of our wonder is the familiar world in which we now reside, but viewed in a new light. Transcendence is not so much out of this world, an escape from reality, as deeper into it. So this reality I am experiencing now I can experience more deeply and there, within it, touch God. There is an urge in each of us to break out of ourselves, and to transcend ourselves in the process. We can smother or we can cultivate this urge, as when, for anything that grabs our attention, we first acknowledge that it is God-in-that-event, God-in-that-person, nodding to us and recruiting the God-wardness-in-me for a response. Yet God will always be beyond, refusing to be boxed in. God is at play in all of creation, enticing each one of us to live more fully, to respond to his call to transcend what we have been into the new.

I now invite you to pay attention to one of four areas of this Wonder-full world that God has created:

- **The wonder of myself:**

With the psalmist (Ps 139) I can praise God that I am so wonderfully made: I have a skeleton to hold up and extend my body, each bone marvellously jointed to the next so that I can move, walk and handle tools with finest precision. The bones in turn are moved by their power units, the contracting and expanding muscles, which are fuelled by blood. This liquid transport system supplies oxygen and nutrients and removes waste, fans out to blood vessels in every part of my body, pumped by the heart through a network of veins and arteries, which link the furthest reaches of the system to the central processing organs: stomach, lungs, liver, kidney. Another body-wide network is the communications system of nerves centred on the brain, which sends out signals to activate the muscles and receives messages from the senses as they are stimulated by physical conditions outside the body. The brain reconstructs not only the world outside but also the inner world of thought more marvellously than any computer. Astonishing to think that inert molecules, say of water, which I drank yesterday, are taking part in thinking my thoughts today. And what is most amazing is the fact that I can be amazed: the mind-stuff. I wonder - but who am I? As was mentioned before, when I view myself as ego, unique and separate, I am divided from all others, but when I view myself as spirit, I am relating and am related to all else.

- **the wonder of the countless types of animals:**

that surround me, constructed according to the same principles and strategies as my own body. They can be as enormous as a whale or as tiny as an insect. Even microscopic organisms have, more or less, the same bodily functions as my own, and much the same complexity. In each form of animal life, every feature that can be named shows a purpose. But dazzling complexity and diversity arose out of different emphases on basic functions: each shows a different strategy for survival. Some forms evolved for speed, others for protection, cleverness, size, camouflage, teamwork, toxicity, etc. It is as if God, playing with creation, set before each kind of animal a choice of paths to be followed and attracted each to proceed unerringly on their chosen way. The millions of diverse forms of animal life represent millions of experiments by a God at play with emergent creatures: let's try a red feather here, antlers there, a flowing mane, a gift of mimicry. Gen. 1 "God said...."Let's make... and God saw that it was good."

- **the wonder of the plant kingdom**

Side by side with the animal kingdom stands the plant kingdom. Ultimately animals depend on plants to supply them with organic nutrients, but plants can convert non-living chemicals into their own living tissue and thereby begin the food chain. Consider the wonder of a single leaf: It is a whole laboratory. To it the tree's sap has transported the necessary chemicals dissolved from the soil; carbon dioxide has been breathed in from the air; sunlight has provided the energy to change

the mix into organic plant matter. And so the tree grows, puts out more leaves and roots, and in season flowers, fruits and disperses seeds, to repeat the miracle that is every tree, every plant. And wherever I look, there is a network of interdependencies between all members of the local life community: it may be the life teeming in a handful of soil, in a coral reef, a rainforest, in arid desert. Such is the cycling of materials that one's waste becomes another's food and little of value is lost. Individual species of plants and animals have evolved, the better to survive, but more so their symbiosis, their life-together. In evolution God has not only drawn each individual and each species successively to transcend itself, but has so drawn all together in each local community of life. Not a battle, but a great game is being played out in every part of the earth.

● **the mineral kingdom**

Forces of wind and rain and incessant movement of tides and waves have refined the surface of the earth. Deep below great pressures and heat have forced lava to the surface to spill out over the terrain (as happened near Narooma when Montague Island was so created), while slowly pushing continental plates around the globe. Even now experience of volcanoes, earthquakes, cyclones, floods and glaciers come to remind us of our restless earth. Or to remind us of the massive earth-shaping in the past. There are mountain peaks uplifted in the crinkling of the earth's crust, deep sedimentary deposits of today's sandstones and shales, great canyons carved out by persistent water flow. Viewing now peaceful scenes in the Blue Mountains, the Flinders Ranges, the Macdonald Range in central Australia, or the vast flatness of central Australia, we can appreciate a little the earth muscling its might in a long distant past. Each stone you see has had a part in that earth history, and so have all the minerals that constitute our bodies.

Ex. 2: We will now break up into small groups of two. Chose one of these four areas in which you have experienced wonder and share this with your partner. Each person will have 10 minutes to share. This could be on the role a pet, a landscape, plants, an illness and recovery, have made on you. We will ring the bell at 10" to change over, and again in 10" at the end.

- The wonder of myself:
- the wonder of the countless types of animals:
- the wonder of the plant kingdom
- the mineral kingdom/landscape

Sharing

Barbara O'Reilly's Text.

Afternoon Tea

2. Between Preconceptions and Wonder

Our growth to become an aware human being is mainly fostered on one hand by the teaching we receive from our social context (it means principally in our own family, at school, in our church, at work) and on the other hand by our own experience which is our own and personal direct confrontation with life. Our experience allows us to make the teaching a reality which speaks to us. If I have been burned by hot water as a kid, it will influence my life; water will probably mean danger for me, while for another it will mean freshness and life. Teaching and experiences condition

our understanding of life. Both form the basic material out of which we are never stopping building our representations of what the world is.

In our search for God, it is the same; the Church is transmitting us the condensed heritage which results out of the long experience of the human kind in its relationship and search for God. We are lucky to be enriched by this teaching because it avoids us to have to discover everything by ourselves. But the teaching is not God, it is only a finger pointing in the direction where we have to search. It is a guide in our own experience. But faith is a mystery: God remains beyond any description. It is impossible to know him or to see him as he is, although we can experience his love and his near presence in our everyday life.

It seems that we are like prisoners and that we cannot see beyond the wall which imprisons us in our human condition. In fact it seems to me that this wall is not due to our human condition, because our human condition is rooted in God and it is our true link to God; what prevents us to experience God's presence is very often the wall we are constructing around ourselves when we create our own representation of the world. Every time we learn something, it is like a brick we add to this wall which grows around us and on which we project our representations. The more it grows, the more it encloses us, because the wall of our representations of the world separates us from the real world and replaces it. We live then in a world of our own creation.

In our relationship with God, we do the same. We never stop replacing God by the idol of our representations of what we think he is. Certainly the teaching helps us to mature and to discover new aspects of God. Each step is a step forward, but nevertheless each step is a new threshold, which should in fact be open to discover the unexpected. Our way to God is a way of wonder, it means a way where representations and certitude have no place. Wonder is pure experience. It is surprise, it is the contrary of what we have frozen in our representations. Our true experience of God happens most of the time when we are in despair, when we feel overwhelmed by life, when we feel lost, when we see our limitations and our incapacity to love truly. This form of despair opens us to receive the grace. When we feel weak, then we are strong, because we have lost our certainty and we are open to any revelation.

God is not this inaccessible figure we think he is. He is near us; he is so near to us that we have got accustomed to his presence, as the presence of our own skin, as the beat of our own heart. We are no longer capable of being aware of his presence because it has already become part of ourselves. Wonder consists sometimes in discovering this immediate proximity and this unknown face of God, beyond our representations.

Ex. 3: Let's sit for 2 min. in silence and try to become completely aware of the presence of our own skin.

Let's sit for 2 min. in silence and try to become completely aware of the beat of our own heart and of the flow of our blood through our body. Just feel how the blood is flowing.

Let's sit for 2 min. in silence and try to become completely aware of our breath, as we inhale and exhale, how this breath is close to the essence of life, how it makes us alive.

Let's sit for 2 min. in silence and try to become completely aware how this skin, this blood and this breath are the real signs of our liveliness, how they are the expressions of this near presence of God in us. This life is not only mechanical; it is pure love in us. The presence of God in us is maybe nothing else than this discrete beat of energy in us which we know already so well.

Sharing

Finish: Song: How Great Thou Art