

Nurturing Wonder

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Instructions for living a life: Pay attention. Be astonished. Talk about it.

—Mary Oliver, “Sometimes”¹

Ever since my first read of René Arcilla’s compelling and beautifully written paper, I have been wondering about wonder.² What is and could be the role of wonder in living a meaningful and justice-oriented life? Why do some people seem to be more open to experiences of wonder than others? How might wonder help us to craft a “democratically cooperative response” to the fact that “our planet is on fire and all we seem to do is fight” among ourselves about what, in the larger scheme of things, are sometimes trivial issues? What does an education that nurtures and sustains wonder look like, and why does it matter so much that we cultivate such an education? Not surprisingly, like a well-trained scholar, my first step in crafting my response was to start by reading about wonder. How do others define wonder? What are the contours of a “poetics of wonder”? Where does wonder enter educational discourse? The more I read, the more I found myself wandering down metaphoric rabbit holes, getting lost in a farrago of arguments about the nature of wonder. It was not until I spent the day hiking at an aptly named place, Enchanted Rock, that I found the inspiration for my response. When I was immersed in the beauty of nature, wandering while wondering, I more fully understood the power of Arcilla’s call for us not to lose sight of the importance of felt experiences of enchantment, of the pre-reasoned “shocked wonder” at the miracles all around us. Hiking up to the top of that huge pink granite mountain, feeling the chilly wind on my face, watching sunlight dance among the wispy clouds, and peering out at the vast expanse of Texas hill country, I experienced viscerally how philosophical wonder is such an important complement to critical pragmatism.

As I see it, Arcilla’s key claim in his provocative essay is that critical pragmatism, while necessary, is insufficient to the task of responding to the

despair and disenchantment that marks our current world. We need to supplement the important action-oriented, problem-solving approach of critical pragmatism with something more fundamental and existential, something that makes a commitment to working for progressive social change possible. For him, this can be found in an educational poetics of wonder. He argues that it is wonder that calls us to attend to the world around us, to care about the planet on fire, to want to preserve its beauty. Wonder comes first, before the disenchantment that leads us to the problem-solving orientation of pragmatism. Wonder involves more than just a felt sense of awe that sometimes stops us in our tracks. It has a pull and an attraction, it connects us to something bigger than ourselves, to “larger patterns—of community, of nature, of ideas and cultural forms—that enable our very survival.”³ Arcilla argues that, when we can learn to savor wonder, it is like a calling, one that can absorb us but also keep us acting and “working with others, but in orientation to enchantment.”

Ultimately, I agree with Arcilla and appreciate his gift of helping me to think more deeply about the quest I wrote about in my presidential address: to maintain a philosophical, not entrepreneurial, subjectivity. He enables me to see limitations in my reflections, which has already allowed me to get better at making more fruitful meaning of my own life and vocation. At the same time, I also agree with Stengel that, in some senses, we are all pragmatists and that a critical pragmatism is precisely what we need to change our world for the better. Moreover, it may be that attention to wonder is implicitly already an important part of pragmatism—even if it is not talked about in quite the way Arcilla does. Taken together, both Arcilla and Stengel prompt me to respond in a classically pragmatist way: to set up a seemingly taken-for-granted dualism, acknowledge the value of both positions, and find a productive way through the tension.

The dualism that I read into Arcilla’s work is hard to name succinctly. On one pole, we have wonder, enchantment, absorption, or what Ann Diller, drawing on Plato, wrote about as “torpefication,” or “the ability to be awed, to be surprised, to be astonished, to be moved in a deeply moral, or ethical, or aesthetic, or epistemological, or ontological way.”⁴ It involves the “ancient experience of *thaumazein*” or the speechless state of contemplation of the mysteries

around us. On the other pole, we have analysis, reason, problem-solving, and what Dewey might call “scientific thinking.” Here, we experience a problem in our world, and that is the impetus for us to try to fix it, to move from a felt sense of disequilibrium to one of greater harmony. I think Arcilla is probably right to say it is the wonder that comes first, especially if we think about children who have not yet been socialized or educated away from relishing that wonder, and do not have the language and critical thinking skills to put their experiences into words and reason about them. Yet I also think Stengel is right that action emerges from experience, including felt experiences of wonder about the world, even if pragmatists sometimes overlook how important it is truly to engage those experiences before jumping into problem-solving mode. Ultimately, it might not matter whether wonder or the desire to resolve felt tensions comes first. The important point is that we need both: the wonder that makes us connect to and care about the world around us, and the problem-solving skills that enable us to begin to put out the fires that are burning all around.

In his book *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How it Can Transform Your Life*, Dacher Keltner does a nice job of showing the integral relationship between wonder and democratic collaboration, though he does not quite use the latter terms. He writes about how awe and wonder transform us; they implicitly point us toward gaps in our current understanding of the world that “transcend the reach of language and the tendencies of science to define, measure, and hypothesize with linear, cause-and-effect theorizing,” which are often precisely the tendencies of pragmatists.⁵ He adds, “in moments of awe . . . we shift from the sense that we are solely in charge of our own fate and striving against others to feeling we are part of a community, sharing essential qualities, interdependent and collaborating.”⁶ In this sense, wonder can be a community-building force; it can help us to be open to new people and ideas, to see our inherent connections to others around us and to our natural world, and thus to build the kind of communities needed to create the better, more enriching, and peaceful world we imagine. As Arcilla maintains, “the wonder that is decisive for our personal lives is inherently social.”

In the end, I so appreciate the invitation to savor what the experience

of wonder looks and feels like, and I am looking forward to Arcilla's further development of an educational poetics of wonder. Like a good pragmatist, I reject the poles of experiencing wonder and reasoning about it. The planet is on fire, and it is also magical and awe-inspiring. Even as Arcilla starts somewhat pragmatically, with the problem he hopes wonder will help us to address—the world on fire—he reminds us that, without the ability to relish in the beauty and magic of the world, we will be hard-pressed both to put out metaphoric and literal fires and to sometimes let them burn as part of ecological regeneration. As I did in my presidential address, I find the words of Mary Oliver again inspiring and relevant to the quest to live a meaningful, justice-oriented, wonder-filled life: we need to pay attention to the world around us, to think about it, and to be astonished by it. We also need to talk about it with others and together take ownership for our impact on this planet, all the while working to make it a better, more livable place. In reflecting on her own mortality in another one of my favorite poems, “When Death Comes,” Oliver writes:

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
 I was a bride married to amazement.
 I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
 if I have made of my life something particular, and real.

I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
 or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.⁷

Like Oliver and, I think, Arcilla (and Stengel), I too want to do more than just visit this world. I want my work and life to contribute to preserving and enhancing the “miracle of Being” that Arcilla writes about so passionately and eloquently. I thank him for helping me to feel (and think about) this wonder more deeply and expansively.

REFERENCES

- 1 Mary Oliver, "Sometimes," in *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2017), 105.
- 2 René Arcilla, "What Calls for Critical Pragmatism? An Introduction to Educational Wonder," *Philosophy of Education* 79, no. 2 (same issue).
- 3 Dacher Keltner, *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How it Can Transform Your Life* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2020), 64-65.
- 4 Ann Diller, "Facing the Torpedo Fish: Becoming a Philosopher of One's Own Education," *Philosophy of Education* 54 (1999): 8.
- 5 Keltner, *Awe*, 65.
- 6 Keltner, *Awe*, 40.
- 7 Mary Oliver, "When Death Comes," in *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2020), 286.