



On Humility and Wonder

By Ralph Lelii

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As a classroom teacher, this work, this sacred endeavor, has been "...my North, my South, my East, my West; my weekday work and my Sunday rest." Unlike W.H. Auden, I offer those lovely phrases not as a funeral dirge but as an idyll, a pledge of fealty from an older man still touched by the idealism that is at the heart of every serious teacher. Now, though, it is mixed as well with a touch of melancholy, spurts of creative engagement tinted with a quiet sorrow at what has been lost.

I have always begun my classes with the presentation of something beautiful, either in song, in print, or in imagery. It has been my habit to choose those things which seem to embody a transcendent beauty that might open the class to a sense of wonder. I believe such experiences furrow the mind, make it more receptive to the kind of elevated curiosity that can help students embrace knowledge for its own sake. This I have practiced for 40 years, and over the past decade, I have seen a steady decline in the nature of student responses to beauty; increasingly, I find a jaded sensibility among them, a sense that they have seen it all before.



Last year I substituted for the regular teacher in a first-grade class in a local charter school. There were 30 in that cohort, one child lovelier than the next, and I thought again of what draws us so deeply to children. Their innocence, yes of course, but more than that even is their persistent and unmitigated sense of wonder. As I showed slides from a series of majestic photographs of rare animals, their attention was trance-like, magnificent. I asked them what they saw in the hippo or the jaguar or the wild boar. All raised their hands in a chorus of alleluias, shouting out their claims for whiskers or dirty spots on the teeth or big wooly ears and ugly noses. What stays with me still, however, was their reactions to the images. Each one was met with a chorus of sighs, and I asked myself who among us would not give his life to protect those children, their sacred sense of wonder in the face of our still mysterious and inscrutable world.

Later that day, I returned to my eleventh-grade philosophy class. I showed the same photographs. Students barely reacted to them; they had seen it all before. They responded by asking me to go to a Google folder of AI generated images. These were often grotesque, soulless forms, digital technique in service to commerce. Nothing seemed even remotely beautiful. The goal of this folio was to shock, to establish artistic anarchy, to mock what has come before. There among those silicon generated idols, students seemed to find no joy, but rather an opportunity to diminish what they perceived as the natural world, its redundant offerings. Their capacity to be surprised and to feel wonder in the life around them, is

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yielding to a remote and inchoate cynicism, a detachment which I believe cuts them off from the essential embrace of wonder, the gateway to curiosity. To experience awe, which is the emotional manifestation of humility, leads to the heart of our enterprise. To lose this, to see forced meanings in the clichés, tropes, and nihilism of the digital metaverse seems to me a crisis in meaning worth noting.

Similarly, it seems that our work as teachers has also been expanded to engage the lack of truth at the highest levels of our political and business cultures. In western academic culture, truth and beauty have been corollaries long before Keats made the claim that it was all we need to know. I admire the emphasis teachers place on honesty and accurate attribution—a form of communal integrity that quietly holds the world together. We do this with great resolve, and yet our students cannot but help to notice that the

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idea of truth is largely irrelevant in our current political culture. Our political “debates” require the sponsoring network to agree to dismiss with fact checking, as the expectation of truth is a condition which precludes the candidates’ participation.

Consequently, it seems we have moved into the realm of political and ideological aesthetics. We either like a candidate or an ideology or we don’t; its truth, and hence its beauty, seems irrelevant. Across five decades, I have watched teachers insisting on an honest attribution of sources, authentic and truthful academic production, and the reasons for this are in themselves transcendently beautiful. It is the belief in virtue for its own sake, an ethos which is capable of evoking a sense of wonder if done with passion and love.

I do not feel hopeless or even daunted by this tendency, trying each day to draw on

that dormant sense of wonder by presenting epistemological problems which can yield both empirical and spiritual reflection. In so doing, my hope is to call students to attention, to stand in the presence of things unseen and unknown, to have them address both aspects of the phenomena. These lines from the poet Gretel Ehrlich use metaphor to explore the wonder of our existence, and I offer it to students at random intervals all year:

If I held a match to my heart, would I be able to see its workings, would I know my body the way I know a city, with its internal civilization of chemical messengers, electrical storms, cellular cities in which past, present, and future are contained, would I walk the thousand miles of arterial roadways, branching paths of communication, and coiled tubing for waste and nutrients, would I know where the passion to live and love comes from?¹

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Last June, I asked my students if they liked the taste of the water in their homes. They answered yes, and I said I want you to think for a moment about an adaptive solution to a problem which would threaten our existence if ignored. “Do you realize,” I asked, “that every glass of water you drink has passed through the bodies and the organs of thousands of other people, flushed their livers, took shelter in the kidneys, sought passage through their bladders?” Here, a

1. Ehrlich, Gretel. *A Match to the Heart: One Woman's Story of Being Struck By Lightning*. Kindle Edition, Penguin Books, 1995.



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simple truth borne out of an intricate web of engineering and scientific prowess produced surprise and even wonder. I asked them to journal a response that evoked a spiritual understanding, and one which also considered the empirical questions arising from it. For a few moments, they were once again like first graders discovering what they don't know, shocked by our shared humanity, considering its impact on their conception of individuality, class, community, and humility. I could glimpse the wonder in their minds as they considered the astonishing implications of this truth hiding in plain sight.

Much of their intellectual detachment can perhaps be explained in part by the Dunning-Kruger Effect. On average, high school students spend seven hours a day on screens.² In so doing they consume thou-

sands of images and videos, many of which seem essentially nihilistic. Paradoxically, they create a faux sense of knowledge and awareness, one full of sound and fury signifying nothing. As a result, I find students often vastly overestimate what they know, and challenge the idea that there is more to learn of value because they daily access visual tropes which create a visceral sense of knowledge. The crisis I see in this is that these figments of reality do not yield to traditional modes of moral analysis. Watching a TikTok video of four boys eating burgers and talking smack simply exists. One cannot say that it is right or wrong, good or bad. It does not have that quality, does not yield to ethical or aesthetic inquiry. It, and thousands of other meaningless scenes, simply exist and are passively absorbed by the viewer. Imagine the effect on the moral imagination as students consume hundreds, thousands of these each day. What possible connection can this endless series of disconnected images have to truth or a sense of wonder or to a coherent intellectual or spiritually vibrant schema of the world?

I believe that we can reverse in time this spiritual stagnation by bringing to them ideas which are by their very existence wondrous, by taking the time to present to our students the miraculous nature of the physical world. For example, I often challenge a class by telling the students that we have 20,000 genes, each a majestic set of complex

2. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/24/well/family/child-social-media-use.html>

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directions for the creation of our bodies. Then, I reveal that human beings, all 8.3 billion of us, have 99.99% identical genes. In that .01 divergence lies all of our differences. How much hate, notions of superiority, arrogance, and cruelty emerge from that miniscule divergent chemical text. What does it mean? What does it reveal about our species? What sense of wonder lies in the contemplation of the sheer magic of it all?

I believe that we can counter this seeming loss for the capacity to grasp at wonder by consciously addressing it with open-ended stories and images of authentic and universal beauty, humbly acknowledging to ourselves how little we know about the world in which we thrive. It is the humility that springs from what we do not know that makes it possible to seek for what we can know. We endlessly blame students for their

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love of phones, screens, and social media as if they were the creators and the purveyors. They are blameless. We as adults have stolen their childhoods, diminished their sense of wonder and the capacity for surprise by handing over the tools of their demise with the lie that we are increasing their levels of sophistication. It is us adults who must work to restore what has been taken from them. ●

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