

*Photo by Mark Edwards*

Wonderland

*We are perishing for lack of wonder,
not for want of wonders.*

G.K. Chesterton

WE ALL ONCE DWELLED IN A world of everyday miracles, where even the smallest new discovery—a smile from a passing stranger, the taste of a wild berry, the sound of rain falling on the roof, the feel of sunbaked beach sand between our bare toes—was a fresh revelation, and a cause for endless delight and celebration.

Instead of fretting about the passing hours and years and our seemingly endless burden of adult responsibilities and concerns, each day passed slowly in its fullness, and a week or a month could seem like an eternity.

Whatever momentary difficulties we encountered came and went as if in a play, lived fully in the moment and then forgotten just as quickly as the next scene unfolded.

So what the hell happened? ...

Well, some hardheaded cynics would simply say ‘life’ happened—that our childhood innocence was nothing more than a fleeting, illusory idyll, shielded by our ignorance of the ‘real world’ and the hard won security and beneficence of parents, teachers, and other responsible caretakers.

And yet, who among us—during a relaxed weekend, an activity-filled vacation, or just an unexpected, serendipitous reverie—hasn’t experienced a return to that state of wonder and openness to the world that we experienced almost routinely as a child?

And who hasn’t on occasion met that rare adult who has somehow managed to fulfill—or even embrace—his or her various adult responsibilities with competence, while simultaneously holding onto the innate joy, curiosity, and enthusiasm for life that we all experienced in our more carefree youth?

These nonconformists—these eccentrics who refuse to surrender to the cynicism which most adult human beings seem to inevitably fall prey—remind us that *escape is possible*, their mere presence among us a rebuff to our facile resignation and our acceptance of ennui as simply the price we must pay to become ‘grown ups’ in a difficult, uncaring, and imperfect world.

No, the loss of our sense of wonder is not inevitable, and it is by no means permanent. Psychologists tell us that our childhood self is every bit as present in us now as it was in our early years, there to be reawakened and relived whenever we have the courage to welcome him or her back into our lives.

This is no sentimental plea to become a child again or to deny the great value and satisfaction that can be found in maturity. Children, in a sense, are unfinished beings, and their spontaneity and irresponsibility is part of their charm, but the fact that any human survives its first years is little short of miraculous. For adults, to ‘become as little children’ is to invite reckless impulsiveness or tyrannical self-centeredness, not mindfulness or compassion for others.

The difficult job of a child is to grow up—to become complete, to fulfill their potential—and the job of adults is to teach them how. But that teaching should be instructive, not dictatorial; liberating, not repressive; loving, not cruel. And above all it should be *reciprocal*, for there is perhaps as much the adult can learn about life from the child as the child can learn from the adult.

One doorway to our lost sense of wonder might be found simply in observing children at play. Invariably, young children enjoy an intimate, natural, spontaneous connection with their developing bodies, being less rigidly bound to their minds and intellect.

Instinctively, children seem to know that we humans are above all curious *animals*, perfectly designed to explore and delight in this sensuous planet. No matter how much we dress them up, medicate them, or abuse them with substances and bad habits, our bodies remain wild, born of and part of the untamed, primordial wilderness that lurks just beneath the thin veneer of civilization.

Whenever one is struck by wonder or astonishment, there is a fusion of the knower and the known, but as adults we are taught to superimpose the past and future onto the present, and lose the newness and excitement of the present moment. Freedom is found only in the timeless *Now*, and a mind filled with thoughts about the *already-known* is not receptive to the ever-flowing current of life, with all its endless possibilities.

Aging is not a process of subtraction or a whittling away, as so many older people seem resigned to believe. It can also be a process of addition, a honing of one’s life experience, senses, and ability to be grateful for the simple joy and wonder of being alive.

Rather than stopping our growth at any one stage, we can live a full human life only by integrating all of our ages and selves, becoming all we have the potential at birth to be. We can learn to see the world through the eyes of both adult and child, each deepened in meaning and wonder by the perspective and life experience of the other.

The effortless openness to experience that we enjoyed when we were very young is still there in each moment for us to grasp. It is a natural, inherent quality, but one deepened with practice and repetition, like any other mental or spiritual practice.

Whatever age we may be, and at whatever stage we may find ourselves in our lives, it’s never too late to have a happy childhood. ■