

# Wonder and Wondering: Five Meditations

*Alison Craig*

## I

I THOUGHT AGAIN TODAY OF HOW I USED TO SIT at forums and devotionals so that I could watch the signer for the deaf club. I knew the manual alphabet and recognized a sign or two, but mostly I watched without understanding, the signer's hands, eloquent and expressive, echoing the words of the speaker. I'd see "thank you," a hand to the lips and then out; I'd identify the rapid-fire finger spelling of a name—much too fast for me to read. And at the end of the prayers, that beautiful sign "the Lord, Jesus Christ," the letter "L" moving diagonally from the left shoulder to the right hip, and then a finger in the palm of each hand. I was always crying long before the prayer.

I couldn't really understand why I cried—perhaps it was that I was seeing speech made visible, and it was utterly beautiful. But as I think of it now, it was not just speech revealed, it was the beauty of language itself, language as poetry—each gesture and movement standing for an idea, a thought, a name. It was the embodiment of my belief that in the beginning of language, every word was a metaphor—a tiny moment of poetry—and that in each of us there is a poet, one who understands and creates with poem-words.

I've also thought again of how beautiful the Salzburg dialect was to me when I first heard it—and could not understand it. It was lilting, almost singing, the vowels rich, the consonants dropped, swallowed, or changed. But as I learned to understand the dialect, I could no longer hear its beauty—instead I heard, "The paper costs ten shillings" or "We do not sell calendars."

If I learn sign language, will I no longer see the beauty and only see the meaning: "Please exit to the right"; "Dress for Success"; "Vote Republican"?

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The newly sighted people Annie Dillard reads about in Marius van Senden's *Sight and Sound* see a world of "color patches . . . the tree with lights in it" (Dillard 1974, 28, 30). Those of us who have seen since birth don't see that beauty anymore. Instead we see leaves, a tree, the meaning without the wonder.

My Greek teacher ridiculed the King James translation that describes the shepherds as simply "wondering" at the appearance of the heavenly hosts; but it's the perfect word for me, since it combines the idea of awe or amazement with the notion of not understanding. We seem to lose both kinds of wondering once we know.

Is that tension always there? The tension between knowing and wondering? Once we know the name, we lose the wonder—both the wondering what it means and the wondering, the awe? In losing the one wonder, the other wonder also disappears.

Does this paradox apply to everything—that I can either see beauty and experience wonder or see meaning and not wonder? I fear it may. Dillard says, "[Beauty] is condemned to an eternal danse macabre with meaning. . . . [T]he color patches of infancy are lost" (1974, 31).

Did Adam and Eve actually have to leave the Garden? Or with their new and knowledgeable eyes did they simply no longer see the paradise they had in their innocence seen?

The distressing conclusion to all this is that the more knowledge I gain, the less beauty I can experience, until at last I'm the perfect encyclopedia—knowing it all, appreciating nothing.

But I reject this conclusion. I cannot accept that to gain the good of knowledge, I must forfeit the good of beauty. Surely God, who knows so much, still sees beauty. He declared his creations "good"; he can't have meant just mechanically accurate, all parts in place. Surely he also meant beautiful.

But where can I again find that beauty? Is it waiting for me to reclaim it?

When and how will the beauty return?

Will reclaiming the beauty be part of becoming as a little child? Again seeing with new eyes—eyes not dimmed but made young, ignorant, capable of Eden?

Does this mean I have to progress again to ignorance as well as to knowledge?

How does God see?

## II

I remember hearing my father tell about a time when he reclaimed beauty and wonder. He spent a year on a ship in the Aleutian Islands

during World War II. For most of the year, he was based on the outermost island of any size. There were no trees on the island, only low-growing shrubs on the hillsides. There was no town either, only a military base of quonset huts and temporary shacks.

But my father wasn't on the base; he was aboard his ship, his first command. And although he was involved in no battles that year, he felt the tension of his new position and the stress of constant wind and fog attacking his small, lightweight ship.

At the end of the year, my father was transferred. He arrived in Seattle at night; the next morning — his first day back in the States — he boarded a bus for Tacoma. As he rode along, standing in the aisle of the overcrowded bus, he saw out the window a dense pine forest lining both sides of the road and, then, scattered among the tall evergreens, a New England-style village with a white church and houses. This peaceful scene and the majestic trees were familiar to him from the past; but seeing them again after his year away, he began to weep and couldn't stop. A woman made room for him to sit on the armrest next to her as he continued to weep at the wonder of what he had seen.

### III

I remember when I saw it happen to my sister, when she found the wonder again. She had her first child at a birthing center, and I was there as the family helper — the person to see that someone attended to the husband's needs.

Much of that long night I have forgotten, but I remember my sister, just a few hours into her labor, leaning against her husband as a contraction gripped her and moaning that she couldn't take any more. She was already beyond her strength, and she had so far yet to go.

By morning, we were all on the bed with her, each holding an arm or a leg. The baby's head had crowned, but then it had stuck there for hours without moving. "Nothing can be worth this agony," my sister moaned.

When, finally, the midwife, kneeling in a pool of blood, caught the baby, we all wept in joy and relief. And my sister, holding her daughter for the first time, said with awe, "It's already worth it!"

### IV

There was a time, too, when I saw the beauty again: the summer I worked in the recreation department at the state school for the mentally and physically impaired.

Devon had little motor control and his movements were stiff and jerky. He couldn't talk, and he couldn't eat regular food because he couldn't chew. But he could sit in a wheelchair, didn't need constant medication, and seemed to enjoy trips. I was assigned to take him everywhere.

I was dragging Devon's wheelchair around the zoo for the fourth time that summer, and just to make some conversation, I said, "Where's the deer, Devon? Point to the deer." He jerked in his chair, his arms flew up in front of him and seemed to lock together, crossed. I glanced away as he jerked again. When I looked back, his arm was stretched out, a finger pointing at the deer.

Why hadn't I tried before to communicate with Devon like that? I had only talked at him, or worse, down to him. After that I asked Devon to point at everything until he would finally wear himself out and stop.

Margaret was my swimming partner that summer, her legs permanently crossed, her arms drawn up tightly at her sides, her hands curled over. I would roll her rigid body from her bed onto the gurney and wheel her down the hall to the swimming pool. Then I'd dress her, diaper and all, in a swimming suit and carry her into the pool. For five minutes or so, I would hold her while her body warmed in the hot water. Then another worker and I would hold her leg, above and below the knee and, pressing gently, would try to bend her knee—half an inch, an inch—and slowly straighten it again. Then her other leg, each ankle, each arm, each hand, slowly, gently. Margaret began to recognize me as the summer wore on. And I could tell how much she liked the water—and how much the movement hurt.

All the summer workers loved eighteen-month-old Miles because he would grin and gurgle when you talked to him. He couldn't sit up because his head was too large, but we took him to the Fourth of July parade anyway and tied his balloon to his wrist so he'd have something above him to watch as he lay on his back.

As I sat there beside Miles, waiting for the parade to start, I saw a child about his age running along the street in front of us. Nothing special, just a child running along the empty street. And suddenly I was crying. The beauty, the grace, the precision and timing of his body; it moved together with such ease, each part in perfect harmony with all the rest. The miracle of it! And all that day, each child I saw was another miracle, each motion a surprise, a relief, a joy.

And throughout the summer, off and on, it would happen again. We'd stop in our special bus for gas, and I would see normal children playing and weep again at the beauty of their going.

## V

How do these experiences apply to everything else? To learning to see again the beauty?

Perhaps there is a universal process at work here. Perhaps when I was a child—before I knew the names of things—another child in motion was poetry to me. But as I learned the name, I lost the wonder of the thing itself; its mystery faded. It became an ordinary and common thing—running. Instead of the beauty, I saw the meaning, the name. But when the bodies of Miles, Devon, and Margaret became ordinary to me, I could see again that poem in motion that is a child running.

I'm coming to see that once we have lost the innocence of Eden, the only way back is through the bitterness of the world, through its injustice and pain and evil. And though I've been thinking of our return to Eden as a return to the "color patches of infancy," it's a return with a difference. We don't return again to the wonder of not knowing. This time we return "and know the place for the first time" (Eliot 1963, 208), and it is utterly beautiful.

Surely that's the goal: to know the name, but to experience again the wonder. Surely that's how God sees.

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