

# Wondering

BY GERALD WINSLOW

O Lord, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!  
You have set your glory above the heavens.  
Out of the mouths of babes and infants  
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,  
to silence the enemy and the avenger.  
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;  
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?  
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,  
and crowned them with glory and honor.  
Psalm 8:1–5 (NRSV)

The Psalms are full of wonder—an awareness of majesty in creation, a sense of awe capable of continual renewal. In this poetry, there is also puzzlement.

The restoration of wonder does not require a journey to a place like the Galápagos Islands. Just take a toddler to the zoo, as I did when River, our firstborn grandson, was barely learning to talk. Just inside the gates of San Diego’s Balboa Park, he exclaimed, “Oh Papa, look!” He had been told to expect magnificent creatures, and he spotted one almost immediately. It was not a giraffe, or a hippo, or one of the gorillas we would see later. It was a lowly

pigeon eating popcorn on the sidewalk.

For many grownups, urban pigeons are no source of amazement. They often seem an overabundant annoyance, supplying unwanted decorations. But for a small child expecting wonder, a pigeon is a remarkable work of art—the bright red feet, the grey wings with black markings, the bright orange eyes, the shimmering chatoyance of turquoise and lavender neck feathers in the sunlight on a bird that clucks along, largely unafraid. Add the popcorn, and how could anyone not be in awe of such a creature? Still, it sometimes requires the eyes of a youngster to see such magnificence. Maybe this is one reason the Psalm refers to the “mouths of babes.”

The glory of creation, as featured in our Psalm, awakens two kinds of wonder. First, there is amazement at the splendor of sky above and earth below. This is the reverential awareness of the Creator’s awesome power. It is what some have called the *mysterium tremendum*, a numinous experience of the breathtaking greatness of creation and the radical otherness of its Creator.<sup>1</sup> In the words of biologist Ursula Goodenough, “Reverence is the religious emotion elicited when we perceive the sacred. We are called to revere the whole enterprise of planetary existence, the whole of it and all of its myriad parts.”<sup>2</sup> Such reverence is wondering *at* creation.

But there is another kind of wonder on display in

this Psalm and elsewhere in Scripture—curiosity about the place of humanity within the magnificence of God’s creation. Just why should the Creator of such grandeur be at all mindful of humans? What does it mean for us to be made in the Creator’s image? How shall we understand our responsibility to the creation of which we are a part? Any careful observer of our planet, its life forms, and the expanding universe of which Earth is such a tiny part, may experience intense curiosity about how things actually work. Such inquisitiveness is wondering *about* creation.

Although visiting the Galápagos Islands is not required to awaken both kinds of wonder, such a visit is certainly more than sufficient. First, there are the islands themselves—an isolated and intriguing archipelago that has arisen at different times through volcanic activity. Some are so new that much of their surface is covered with what appear to be lava flows that have just recently cooled. Others have had time to develop soil that supports a rich variety of plant life. Some are quite arid, while others receive more rain and are lush with vegetation.

More likely to elicit wonder are the distinctive creatures living on the islands or in the waters surrounding them. Because of the absence of natural predators, and protection from humans, the animals exhibit a surprising absence of fear. Most readers have probably heard of the blue-footed boobies, with feet so turquoise blue they appear to have been painted by one who threw caution to the wind. Many of the islands’ animals, like the marine iguanas or the flightless cormorants, live only on the archipelago, and nowhere else on the planet. A personal favorite, unique to the islands, is the Galápagos dove, which sports impressive feathers and light-blue eyeliner. Then there are several unique species of enormous Galápagos tortoises, some weighing nearly 1,000 pounds and living over 150 years.

Being in unusually close proximity to this rich variety of unique creatures is an awe-inspiring experience. It is wonderful. It would seem impossible to be in such a setting and not wonder *at* the rich panoply of life. More than one person has described this experience as being a foretaste of eternity, when life will exist in a never-ending realm of peace.

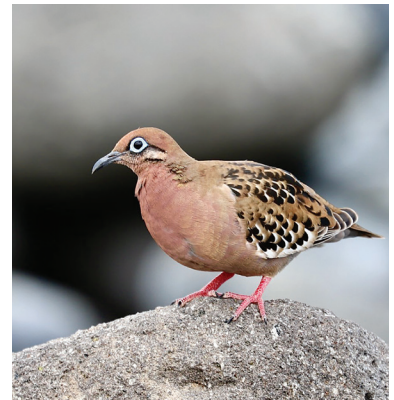
But hiking through the Galápagos Islands, or snorkeling around them, may also awaken that other kind of wonder—curiosity about how life works. The diverse

species of finches, the beaks of each apparently suited to a particular seed size and seed toughness, still prompts questions, as the little birds did for Charles Darwin in another century. When one begins to wonder about the unique forms of life in these islands, the questions quickly multiply. How did those cormorants lose most of the function of their useless-for-flying, stubby wings? Where did the marine iguanas come from, and how did they (unlike any other lizards known today) learn to swim and eat algae under water. And how have they become more expert than any other lizard species at expelling excess salt through their nostrils? How could anyone not wonder about these questions?

Humans, I believe, were created for both kinds of wonder. We are given capacities, both perceptual and intellectual, to stand in awe and to ask questions. The best of faith and science, in my view, is more likely to mature if these two impulses are held in complementary connection. In addition to Psalm 8, let me call on two diverse witnesses: Ellen White and Albert Einstein. First, White: “God is the author of science. Scientific research opens to the mind vast fields of thought and information, enabling us to see God in His created works.”<sup>3</sup> A few sentences later, she adds, “Rightly understood, science and the written Word agree, and each sheds light on the other.”<sup>4</sup> Then, Einstein: “Science can only be created by those who are thoroughly imbued with the aspiration toward truth and understanding. This source of feeling springs, however, from the sphere of religion. I cannot conceive of a genuine scientist without that profound faith. . . . The situation may be expressed by an image: science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.”<sup>5</sup>

The scientists I have known personally, and most admire, seem to understand the depths of truth expressed in passages like those just quoted. They are humbled by the immensity of the realities they study and by the indications that there is so much more to learn. Whether their studies take them to subatomic particles or to the outer reaches of the galactic universe, these scientists have a keen sense of the depths of the nature they yearn to understand. Their pursuit of detailed scientific evidence does not diminish their sense of wonder.

A specific source of wonder, mentioned in our Psalm, is the starry heavens of the night sky. It is a marvel



Gerald Winslow photographs the beautiful wildlife of the Galápagos islands, including blue-footed boobies, marine iguanas, a tortoise, Darwin finches, and a Galápagos dove.

wonderfully accessible from the upper deck of a boat in the Galápagos on a perfectly clear night, without the light pollution so prevalent in urban and suburban life. For those of us who live north of Earth's equator, there is the rare privilege of looking far south of the celestial equator to see constellations entirely new to us. Would the joy of that experience be lessened if accompanied by an astronomy lecture from an expert in astrophysics?

One of Walt Whitman's best-known poems seems to answer Yes to this question:

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,  
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in  
columns before me,  
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to  
add, divide, and measure them,  
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he  
lectured with much applause in the lecture-  
room,  
How soon unaccountable I became tired  
and sick,

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Although visiting the Galápagos Islands is not required to awaken both kinds of wonder, such a visit is certainly more than sufficient.



Till rising and gliding out I wander'd  
off by myself,  
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time  
to time,  
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.<sup>6</sup>

While I think I might understand this response, it would not be mine. I was blessed to spend a school year studying physical astronomy, taught by physicist Professor Claude Barnett. From him, I learned to love the mysteries of deep space, to learn the developmental cycle of stars, to think in terms of millions of light years, and to wonder. I have vivid memories of riding in a small bus with Barnett and the rest of the class to find just the right spot to observe an autumn meteor shower. Sitting in a wheat field in a circle, with our backs to the center, like a covey of wary quails, we charted the arrival of each blaze of light. The fact that we were learning what causes meteor showers, that (for example) each appeared to radiate from a central place, did not reduce the glory of the light show. The astrophysicist has even more reason to be dazzled by the starry heavens because she or he understands more.

It is just here that I want to express gratitude for those who, like Dr. Barnett, taught me to wonder *at* and wonder *about* our universe.<sup>7</sup> I would also invite the reader to recall, with thanks, those who provided such gifts. My list includes Professor J. Paul Grove, who taught me to look far more deeply into the sacred texts of Scripture; Professor Lucile Knapp, who taught me Greek and the truth that texts can be translated and interpreted in many ways, some better and some worse; Professor Robert H. Brown, a physicist who taught me about geochronometers using radioactive decay rates. It was Brown, a conservative Seventh-day Adventist professor and later the director of the Church's Geoscience Research Institute, who introduced me and many others to the reality of deep time. Controversial in the 1960s, Brown's views about the age of the Earth's rocks appear to have become mainstream thinking in Adventism nowadays.

I could add many names to this treasured list of teachers who cared deeply about truth. Despite the vast differences in their scholarly disciplines and in their ways of wondering, there was one distinctive trait shared by all. Because they pursued truth in the context of faith, they were not satisfied with shallow answers to deep questions.

For me, they are exemplars of faith that awakens the fullness of wonder.

For Christians, such faith is founded on the belief that the incarnate Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, is both Savior and Creator. The definitive creation text for Christians is this: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people."<sup>8</sup> For believers, this is the greatest Wonder. It is also the source of confidence that liberates us to wonder *at* and wonder *about* the world He made.

## Endnotes

1. The notion of the "mysterium tremendum" was brought to prominence by theologian Rudolf Otto in his work, *The Idea of the Holy*, first published in English in 1923, and available in several editions.
2. Ursula Goodenough, *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 170.
3. Ellen White, "The Position and Responsibility of a True Educator," *Signs of the Times* 26, no. 11 (March 14, 1900): 165.
4. White, "The Position and Responsibility of a True Educator," 165.
5. Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions*, trans. Sonja Bargmann, ed. Cal Seelig (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1954), 46.
6. Walt Whitman, "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer," available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45479/when-i-heard-the-learn-d-astronomer> (accessed Oct. 4, 2021).
7. Claude Barnett and the other professors mentioned in this paragraph were on the faculty of Walla Walla College (now University) in the 1960s.
8. John 1:1-4



DR. GERALD WINSLOW, pictured here with his wife, Dr. Betty Winslow, is the director of Loma Linda University's Center for Christian Bioethics. He is also professor of religion in LLU's School of Religion and the founding director of LLU's Institute for Health Policy and Leadership. For over a decade he also served as a vice president in LLU's health system. For over fifty years, he has specialized in teaching and writing about ethics, especially biomedical ethics. The couple celebrated their 55th wedding anniversary in the Galápagos Islands.