

# Of Amazement and Wonderment

What impact might we have on the world  
if we lived from a place of awe and wonderment –  
struck by the staggering mystery that surrounds us?

Mary Edith Olaguer, RGS

*"The sense of wonder is the hallmark  
of our species and the central feature of the  
human spirit." [1]*

In the 7th decade of my life, I was elected to our congregational leadership team with offices in Rome, and so, for the moment, I am a migrant in a city of panettones, motorcycles, monuments, and ruins - living among diverse cultures, multiple generations, and even the pope. The move has pulled the rug from under my feet and I am amazed by the gap that has replaced it. A gap that, for lack of a better word, I'd call a long, billowing stretch of not-knowing -- a heaving shadow, a slice of agony piercing through all the shutters of my mind. Never far, it can hover so close it singses my skin, like a jokester asking for a kiss but which quickly turns into a weight, a shroud that no exaggeration can describe.

Amazed I ask: Who are you? From what edges of the unknown do you come; to what peripheries are you dragging me? Will fear make me deny you - erase all nearness of you? Are you friend? Are you foe?

Day turns into night into day ... and there is no one to turn to.

For the last 50 years I've lived the contemplative life in a small community of like-minded sisters the best we can. A simple life of prayer is the air we breathe and with this life we embrace the world, especially women and children. Those rendered homeless, the young wracked by loneliness, trafficked and torn in the cruelest of ways populate our hearts and torment our comfort zones. Many a time Love has come, at-home with us. Except, I have nothing to show for any of these. Rather, just with my 'old boots and a torn coat' - I have been plucked and plunked into an immensity unlike any before.

Mary Oliver perhaps understands:

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?  
Am I no longer young, and still half-  
perfect? Let me  
keep my mind on what matters,  
which is my work,  
which is mostly standing still and  
learning to be  
astonished.

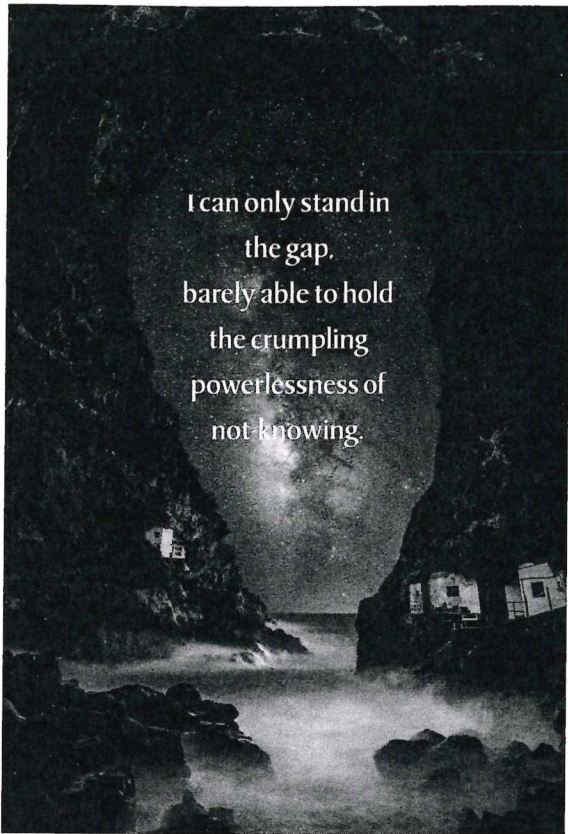
Yes, half-perfect and no longer young,  
let me keep my mind on what matters.  
My "dwelling mind" (Heidegger) that  
has learned to look and never unlook  
from the terror and chaos that beleague  
our common home but even more so,  
grasped by wonder when gazing at the

beauty and splendor creation bursts  
with. Yes, no longer young like Sarah  
when she and Abraham were called out  
of Ur, I am to learn again how to stand  
still on a painful back. To be shown anew  
how a child is astonished. To be schooled  
in human becoming so that we evolve  
into the next level of consciousness and  
all flourish in the reign God invites us to  
-- here, now, in this kairos time.

Called to leadership at such a time  
as this to embody a universal  
culture of justice? Where and  
which world offers the possibility for  
such covenantal promise to be fulfilled?  
In amazement, Sarah could only laugh!  
And I? I can only stand in the gap, barely  
able to hold the crumpling powerlessness  
of not-knowing. I have completely  
forgotten that Love orders chaos and  
darkness can never overcome the Light. I  
must start again.

Let me amaze myself; let me gather  
my courage and speak about my fears.  
Would you have the time?

Hannah Arendt has said that to inflict  
immense suffering it is enough simply  
not to think, to have inhibited the ability  
to judge or discern between good and  
evil; that is, to behave automatically,



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hiding behind an “it is” done, an “it is” imposed, or “it is” carried out. Will my mind, called to participate in uncreated Light (Aquinas), withstand the encroachment of age and illness to prompt me 24/7 to “act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with my God”? (Micah 6:8)

The challenge is to be faithful to discern and respond to the gap God puts before us.... “Gentleness of communion requires leaders to learn to absorb pain without passing it on to others or to themselves. Before the gaps of injustice, they radiate conviction, not condemnation, redemption, not final judgment, embrace, not rejection.” (cf. 1 Peter 2:21)

Who is not amazed; whose belief systems will not crack before such a call?

Then, in response to Pope Francis who said:

“We are in a change of era. Let our lives not be a closed system incapable of generating questions, doubts – but be alive, be unsettled, enlivened. Recognize the shift in consciousness

that the Gospel asks of us. Our search has a face that is not rigid, it has a body that moves and grows, it has a soft flesh – it is called Jesus Christ.”

**M**ust not contemplatives ask themselves: do my spiritual practices awaken mind and heart to the travails, joys, and sorrows of my time? Have I honed my capacities, skills, and gifts so I can participate and contribute? Practicing synodality, am I in conversation with my neighbors or have I built fences to protect how I live and how I pray? Have I crossed over to mature agency so that I am free to serve, to understand -- even console -- migrants without homes because I also have nowhere to rest my head?

Long ago German Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper wrote:

“Wonder acts upon (us) like a shock, we are ‘moved’ and ‘shaken,’ and in the dislocation that succeeds all that we had taken for granted as being natural or self-evident loses its compact solidity and obviousness; (we) are literally dislocated and no longer know where we are....

What we had taken for granted was not ultimately self-evident. Wonder signifies that the world is profounder, more all-embracing and mysterious than the logic of everyday reason....

Mystery means that a reality cannot be comprehended because its light is ever-flowing, unfathomable, and inexhaustible. And that is what the wonderer really experiences....

The joy that accompanies wonder is the joy of the beginner, of the mind and spirit that is always open to what is fresh, new, and as yet unknown.” [2]

Listen. Listen to Sarah’s belly laugh – a baby! Every century thereafter and every day, a precursor to the promise of the joy of the Gospel shows up. Behold! Do not be afraid but, come, be tenderly kissed!

The phoebe, the delphinium.  
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.  
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all the ingredients are here, which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart and these body-clothes, a mouth with which to give shouts of joy to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam, telling them all, over and over, how it is that we live forever. [3]

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## Endnotes

1. Agustin Fuentes, *Why We Believe: Evolution and the Human Way of Being*, quoting Mel Konner, Kindle Edition, 2019, p. 14
2. Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, Ignatius Press, Kindle Edition, p. 114-117
3. Mary Oliver, “Messenger,” *Thirst*, Beacon Press, Boston Massachusetts, 2006, p. 1



*Mary Edith Olaguer, RGS: “The challenge is to be faithful to discern and respond to the gap God puts before us.”*