

# HARVARD MEDICAL

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ON CREATIVE GROUND



# HARVARD MEDICAL

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One of the most fascinating and least discussed discoveries in the study of the wild chimpanzees was described in a short paper by Harold Bauer. He was following a well-known male chimpanzee through the forest of the Gombe Stream Reserve in Tanzania when the animal stopped beside a waterfall. It seemed possible that he had deliberately gone to the waterfall rather than passing it incidentally, but that was not absolutely clear. In any case, it was an impressive spot: a stream of water cascading down from a twenty-five-foot height, about a mile from the lake, thundering into the pool below and casting mist for sixty or seventy feet; a stunning sight to come upon in the midst of a tropical forest.

The animal seemed lost in contemplation of it. He moved slowly closer, and began to rock, while beginning to give a characteristic round of "pant-hoot" calls. He became more excited, finally beginning to run back and forth while calling, to jump, to call louder, to drum with his fists on trees, to run back again. The behavior was most reminiscent of that observed and described by Jane Goodall in groups of chimpanzees at the start of a rainstorm—the "rain dance," as it has been called. But this was one animal alone, and not surprised as the animals are by sudden rain—even if he had not deliberately sought the waterfall out, he certainly knew where it was and when he would come upon it.

He continued his activity long enough so that it seemed to merit some explanation, and did it again in the same place on other days. Other animals were observed to do it as well. They had no practical interest in the waterfall. The animals did not have to drink from the stream or cross it in that vicinity. To the extent that it might be dangerous, it could be easily avoided, and certainly did not interest every animal. But for these it was something they had to look at, return to, study, watch, become excited about: a thing of beauty, an object of curiosity, a fetish, an imagined creature, a challenge, a communication? We will never know.

But for a very similar animal, perhaps ten million years ago, in the earliest infancy of the human spirit, something in the natural world must have evoked a response like this one—a waterfall, a mountain vista, a sunset, the crater of a volcano, the edge of the sea—something that stopped it in its tracks and made it watch, and move, and watch, and move, and watch again; something that made it return to the

# The Dawn of Wonder

spot, though nothing gainful could take place there, no feeding, drinking, reproducing, sleeping, fighting, fleeing, nothing *animal*. In just such a response, in just such a moment, in just such an animal, we may, I think, be permitted to guess, occurred the dawn of awe, of sacred attentiveness, of wonder.

The human infant, for its first few months of life, is all eyes, in a way that no other animal infant quite is. It isn't just that its eyes are good, that it does a lot of looking; it's that it does so little else, really. It can suck, of course, and swallow, but the rest of what it does is very primitive, except for the functions of attentiveness. Even in the adult brain, one-third of all incoming signals come through the eyes. In the infant, looking and seeing are way ahead of most other functions in development, with the possible exception of listening and hearing. The infant is not a passive figure, nor an active one either, but what might be called an actively receptive one—eagerly, hungrily receptive, famished for sights and sounds, no vague, fuzzy intelligence in a blooming, buzzing confusion, but a highly ordered, if simple, mind with a fine sense of novelty, of pattern, even of beauty. The light on a leaf outside the window, the splash of red on a woman's dress, the shadow on the ceiling, the sound of rain—any of these may evoke a rapt attention not, perhaps, unlike that of the chimpanzee at the waterfall.

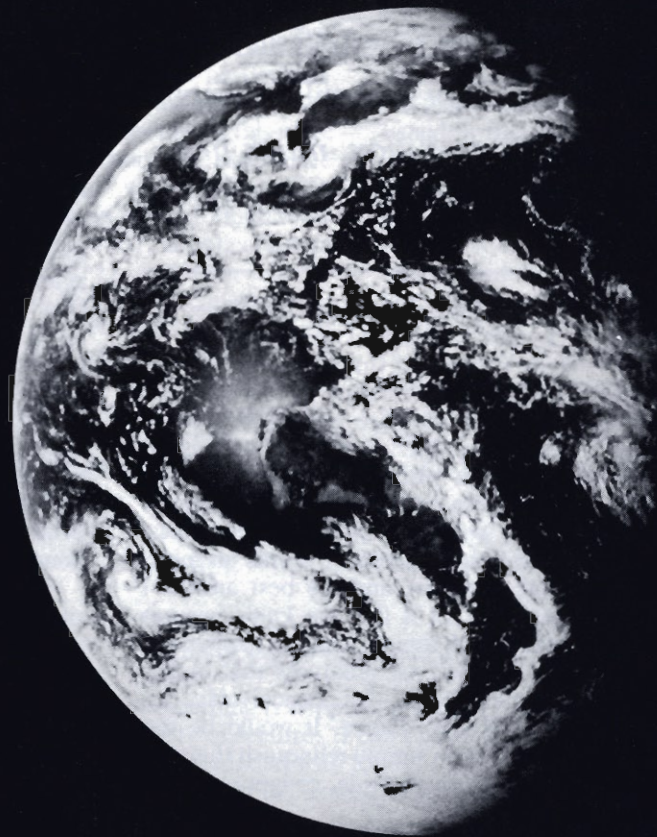
by Melvin Konner

For most people, as they grow, that sense of wonder diminishes in frequency, becoming at best peripheral to the business of everyday life. For some, it becomes the central fact of existence. These follow two separate paths: Either the sense of wonder leads them down an analytic path, or it leads them to simple contemplation. Either way the sense of wonder is the first fact of life, but the paths are completely different in every other way. The analyst, or scientist, moved to reveal by explaining, breaks apart the image, and the sense of wonder, focusing sequentially on the pieces. The contemplator, or artist, moved to reveal by simply looking, keeps the image and the sense of wonder whole. The artist contrives to keep the attention riveted without fragmentation, by means of high trickery. This trickery involves transmuting the image into human speech—whether a literary, plastic, or musical form of speech—thus fixing in place forever the sense of wonder.

There is a photograph that has by now been seen by most people living in civilized countries. It was taken from an ingenious if crude vehicle traveling many thousands of miles per hour, across a vast expanse of space empty of air, by men who had devoted their lives, courageously and at great personal cost, to the mastery of nature through machinery. This photograph cost perhaps a billion dollars, and in one sense it is worth every penny.

It shows an almost spherical object poised against a backdrop of black. The object is partly colored a deep, warm, pretty blue, with many broken, off-white swirls drawn across it. It looks at first like a mandala, a strange symbol woven on black cloth. It looks whole, somehow, and rather small. But as we study it (it draws us in almost mysteriously), some red-brown shapes obscured among the swirls of white take on before our eyes the unmistakable images we first saw and memorized as children encountering the geography of the continents. If the space program accomplished nothing else (and I am often at pains to discern what it did accomplish), we must be grateful to it for producing that photograph.

"Got the earth right out our front window," said Buzz Aldrin. A medium-sized mammal from a middling planet of a middle-aged star in the arm of an average galaxy, gazing at home. There was no excess of poetry on that mission. There was, of course, the stark poetry of aeronautics gobbledygook and



*“The most beautiful experience we can have  
is the mysterious. It is the fundamental  
emotion which stands at the cradle of  
true art and true science.”*

—ALBERT EINSTEIN  
*The World As I See It*

the arch, well-prepared, historic *mot* of Neil Armstrong setting foot on the Sea of Tranquillity, but "Beautiful, beautiful," "Magnificent sight out here," and "Got the earth right out our front window," was about the level at which these unique first views of the natural world were transmuted to human speech. This was no fault of Armstrong or Aldrin; they were chosen for other talents, which they had in full measure. But it is intriguing that such spontaneous poetry as there was was evoked by the machinery. "The Eagle has wings," one of them said as the lunar landing vehicle separated, after some difficulty, from the orbiting command station. *The eagle*, bold symbol of human hope on the North American continent and, beyond that, of the hope of humanity in the mission, *has wings*, has the means to transcend technical difficulty and to emerge, having mastered natural law.

But this stepping off the earth is an illusion. The mastery of natural law has proceeded no further than the grasp of some elementary laws of physics. Compared with the uncharted, infinitely more intricate laws of biology and behavior that govern the human spirit, this mastery is trivial, a mere conjurer's trick. The mastery of physical law can no longer save us while we are grounded in a tangle of ignorance of the natural laws that govern our behavior. In this sense, the eagle does not have wings.

When I was a young man in college, a professor took me to the American Museum of Natural History, not to the exhibits, which I had often seen, but into the bowels of the place, among the labyrinths of storage cabinets of bones and skins and rocks and impossibly ancient fossils. I was very much impressed by this chance to see the museum the way insiders, professionals, saw it.

There I met a man who had devoted most of his life to the study of the skeletal remains of *archaeopteryx*—the earliest tetrapod with feathered wings—embedded in a Mesozoic rock. I was introduced to him, awed by him, impressed with his intelligence and wisdom. It was obvious that he wanted to impart to me some piece of genuine, useful knowledge gained from the countless hours of squinting over that crushed tangle of bone and rock.

What he finally said was that he thought *archaeopteryx* was very much like people. This of course puzzled me, as it was calculated to do, and when I pressed him to explain, he said, "Well, you know, it's such a transitional crea-

ture. It's a piss-poor reptile, and it's not very much of a bird." Apart from the shock of hearing strong language in those relatively hallowed halls, there was an intellectual shock to my young mind that fixed those phrases in it permanently.

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*I suspect that the human spirit is insufficiently developed at this moment in evolution, much like the wing of archaeopteryx.*

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The dinosaurs ruled this planet for over a hundred million years, at least a hundred times longer than the brief, awkward tenure of human creatures, and they are gone almost without a trace, leaving nothing but crushed bone as a memento. We can do the same more easily and, in an ecological sense, we would be missed even less. What's the difference? seems an inevitable question, and the best answer I can think of is that we *know*, we are capable of seeing what is happening. We are the only creatures that understand evolution, that, conceivably, can alter its very course. It would be too base of us to simply relinquish this possibility through pride, or ignorance, or laziness.

It seems to me we are losing the sense of wonder, the hallmark of our species and the central feature of the human spirit. Perhaps this is due to the depredations of science and technology against the arts and the humanities, but I doubt it—although this is certainly something to be concerned about. I suspect it is simply that the human spirit is insufficiently developed at this moment in evolution, much like the wing of *archaeopteryx*. Whether we can free it for further development will depend, I think, on the full reinstatement of the sense of wonder. It must be reinstated in relation not only to the natural world but to the human world as well. At the conclusion of all our studies we must try once again to experience the human soul as soul, and not just as a buzz of bioelectricity; the human will as will, and not just a surge of hormones; the human heart not as a fibrous, sticky pump, but as the metaphoric organ of understanding. We need not believe in them as metaphysical

entities—they are as real as the flesh and blood they are made of. But we must believe in them as entities; not as analyzed fragments, but as wholes made real by our contemplation of them, by the words we use to talk of them, by the way we have transmuted them to speech. We must stand in awe of them as unassailable, even though they are dissected before our eyes.

As for the natural world, we must try to restore wonder there too. We could start with that photograph of the earth. It may be our last chance. Even now it is being used in geography lessons, taken for granted by small children. We are the first generation to have seen it, the last generation not to take it for granted. Will we remember what it meant to us? How fine the earth looked, dangled in space? How pretty against the endless black? How round? How very breakable? How small? It is up to us to try to experience a sense of wonder about it that will save it before it is too late. If we cannot, we may do the final damage in our lifetimes. If we can, we may change the course of history and, consequently, the course of evolution, setting the human lineage firmly on a path toward a new evolutionary plateau.

We must choose, and choose soon, either for or against the further evolution of the human spirit. It is for us, in the generation that turns the corner of the millennium, to apply whatever knowledge we have, in all humility but with all due speed, and to try to learn more as quickly as possible. It is for us, much more than for any previous generation, to become serious about the human future, and to make choices that will be weighed not in a decade or a century but in the balances of geological time. It is for us, with all our stumbling, and in the midst of our dreadful confusion, to try to disengage the tangled wing. □

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