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Dangerous wonder – the adventure of childlike faith

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A brilliant, easy, read, 150pp, full of challenge and stimulus.

Introduction

The place all children know about

Children live in a world of dreams and imagination, a world of aliveness. Playing Superman and feeling alive, hearing a voice deep inside, a warm and loving voice, a living, believing, voice, a wild and dangerous voice. Then he realised he couldn't fly after all, and his God-hearing went bad. There is a voice of wonder and amazement inside all of us; but we grow to realise we can no longer hear it, and we live in silence. It isn't that God stopped speaking; it is that our lives became louder – the increasing crescendo of our possessions, the ear-piercing noise of busyness, and the soul-smothering volume of our endless activity drowned out the still, small voice of God. It happens gradually. Reading Nouwen and realising it didn't have to be like that; that if he was willing to leave these things and follow, God would lead him into treacherous territory where everyday would be an experience of danger and wonder at the same time, an adventure of dangerous wonder. Since then God hasn't been telling him what to do, but rather how much he loves him; not correcting his behaviour but leading him into his arms. So he has tried to write an unpredictable book about God.

1. Dangerous wonder

Little boy and snow. The most critical issue facing Christians today is dullness. 'We have lost our astonishment. The Good News is no longer good news, it is okay news. Christianity is no longer life *changing*, it is life *enhancing*. Jesus doesn't change people into wild-eyed radicals anymore, He changes them into 'nice people'.' But radical Christianity wasn't nice; it was category-smashing, life-threatening, anti-institutional; it spread like wildfire through the 1st century and was considered by those in power to be dangerous. 'I want to be filled with an astonishment which is so captivating that I am considered wild and unpredictable and ... well ... *dangerous*'. I want to be dangerous to a dull and boring religion. I want a faith that is considered dangerous by our predictable and monotonous culture. Dullness is a cultural issue.

Teachers at theological college – are dream stealers. In all educational institutions we learn to be realistic. Bible calls religious dream stealers Pharisees.

Our culture is predictable; it clones, levels human personality and defies predictability. Diversity is no longer recognised as strength in such a culture. Voices advise financial security, a good job, a decent standard of living. Buechner:

The danger is that you will not listen to the voice that speaks to you through the seagull mounting the gray wind, say, or the vision in the temple, that you do not listen to the voice inside you or to the voice that speaks from outside but specifically to you out of the specific events of your life, but that instead you listen to the great blaring, boring, banal voice of our mass culture, which threatens to deafen us all by blasting forth that the only thing that really matters about your work is how much it will get you in the way of salary and status, and that if it is gladness you are after, you can save that for weekends.

But when our possessions possess us, risk and adventure become impossible. Dangerous wonder is still possible – you can still experience a volatile mix of astonishment and terror, awe and risk, amazement and fear, adventure and exhilaration, tears and laughter, passion and anticipation, daring and enchantment. Examples: Mary. Disciples during the storm.

'Shouldn't Christians be known by the fire in their souls, the wild-eyed gratitude in their faces, the twinkle in their eyes, and a holy mischief in their demeanours? Shouldn't Christianity be considered dangerous – unpredictable, threatening to the status quo, living outside the lines, uncontrollable, fearless, wild, beyond categorization or definition?

2. Risky curiosity

Risk .. is indispensable to any significant life, nowhere more clearly than in the life of the spirit. The goal of faith is not to create a set of immutable, rationalized, precisely defined and defensible beliefs to preserve forever. It is to recover a relationship with God. (Dan Taylor, *The myth of certainty*)

Faith has been reduced to a comfortable system of *beliefs* about God instead of an uncomfortable encounter *with* God.

Childlike faith understands that God is as capable of destroying us as he is of saving us. Risky curiosity breaks from the safety and comfort of a tame faith and ventures into the terrifying presence of a 'not so tame' God.

Children are born with a natural curiosity and a built-in daring. It doesn't take long before our culture explains to them the 'inappropriateness' of curiosity in the 'real' world. Our assumptions are:

1. questions can be embarrassing
2. questions can make people uncomfortable
3. questions can be dangerous
4. questions can be 'right' or 'wrong'

But when people are hungry for God, every question is right. Thomas wasn't a doubter, he was longing for God. you must be willing to ask questions even when they threaten everyone around you. you must be willing to isolate yourself by asking questions. You must be willing to be curious, as a child is curious. The ancient church used to speak of 'unknowing'; they believed the end of knowledge had much to teach us.

3. Wild abandon

Mistaking this active life of faith for an institutionally backed and culturally bound belief system is similar to reducing the Mona Lisa to paint-by-numbers. (Dan Taylor)

Recalls a childhood summer spent building a spaceship; wild abandon – first experience of giving himself over to an idea bigger than himself.

Mistakes – a sign of growth. Bible full of people who made them. The church should be the one place in our culture where mistakes are not only expected but welcomed. It isn't about following the rules. Every time the disciples thought of rules, eg no children near Jesus, don't let the crowd touch Jesus, Jesus said, no, look, we aren't substituting religious rules with our rules, we're substituting them with Me. Most of us have spent our Christian lives learning what we can't do instead of celebrating what we can do in Jesus. It was Jesus who taught us how to break the rules. What are we afraid to abandon? Comfort? Career? Money? Security? Theology? Expectations? Fear of making a mistake? Need for certainty? We are afraid to follow Christ with abandon – as were others he met. Christian life is more than finding Jesus; it is following him.

4. Daring playfulness

'Jesus Christ came to save us from our sin and to save us from becoming severe, unyielding, harsh, and terminally serious'. Sermon on Mt – remarks about fasting (don't look sombre), about worry and birds of the air, about building on sand – irony, playfulness, metaphor, hyperbole.

People don't expect Christian ministers to be playful.

'Just because we believe the gospel is a life-and-death matter doesn't mean we have to act as if we're dead'. We don't value play, because we live in a culture which worships busyness and activity. There is no time to play. But play is an expression of God's presence in the world; not an escape, but the way to release the life-smothering grip of busyness, stress, and anxiety.

'Instead of Christians wearing sackcloth and ashes at the condition of our world, maybe we should strike up a game of capture the flag in our neighbourhood'. What if we invited people over to our home and, instead of telling them about our joy, lived it by playing with them? What if we could hear laughter in a church as well as 'amens'?

5. Wide-eyed listening

One of the problems in the church is noise; maybe we have become so active and noisy that we have drowned out the thin silence of God. Maybe instead of trying to do more, we should try to do less, to pay attention to the presence of God.

Most of us spend our lives impersonating ourselves. Children are who they are; and we teach them they are what they wear/do/have. Once we quit listening to the way we are made, we begin to lose our God hearing.

We live in a quick-fix culture, and the benefits of the gospel have been adapted to fit it – we expect God to change our lives instantly. Add the idea that waiting is a waste of time, and you get Christians who want and expect God to meet their every need now. But God is a slow God.

6. Irresponsible passion

I'm discovering that a spiritual journey is a lot like a poem. You don't merely recite a poem or analyze it intellectually. You dance it, sing it, cry it, feel it on your skin and in your bones. You move with it and feel its caress. It falls on you like a teardrop or wraps around you like a smile. It lives in the heart and the body as well as the spirit and the head. (Sue Monk Kidd, *When the heart waits*)

'The locus of Christian thinking appears to be shifting from N America and N Europe where people write rules and obey them, to places like Africa and Latin America where people still know how to dance' – Will Willimon.

Most people believe that following Jesus is all about living right. *Not true.* Following Jesus is about living *fully*. See Romans 8.10-11,15.

Passion is aliveness. Living with expectancy, anticipation, and enthusiasm. The opposite of passion is dead living. Living a life that is borrrrrrring!

Where has all the passion gone? Three ways to get back in touch with it:

1. Recognise the passion of Jesus. Prodigal son.
2. Receive the gift of gratitude. Mary and the perfume.
3. Take the risk to live passionately. Passion is risky. Disciples left homes and jobs. Forget what world offers as sensible, responsible and prudent, and rediscover the childlike passion of falling in love with God.

7. Happy terror

I want to know what happened to the bone-chilling, earth-shattering, gut-wrenching, knee-knocking, heart-stopping, life-altering fear that leaves us speechless, paralyzed, and glad. The terror I am speaking of is a mix of wonder, awe, fear, and worship, all happening at the same time. How did our awe of God get reduced to a lukewarm appreciation of God? how can we think of Jesus without remembering his ground-shaking, thunder-crashing, stormy exit on the cross? How did God become a pal instead of a heart-stopping presence?

We have become too familiar with God, oblivious to a terror that can liberate us. We have become *comfortable* with the radical truth of the gospel; we have become familiar with Jesus; we have become satisfied with the church. The quick and sharp Bible has become slow and dull; the world-changing church has become changed by the world; and the life-threatening Jesus has become an interesting enhancement to modern life.

We've been intimidated by those who claim to be familiar with God, who claim to have the Christian life all taped up in steps and laws. They have reduced the gospel to a set of principles, Bible verses, moral absolutes, and theorems. It is implied that once we have understood the formula we will be fine because we will know how God works.

8. Naïve grace

Children don't colour inside the lines. Most of my life I heard the message loud and clear that Christianity was all about coloring within the lines and coloring well. If I did all the things I was meant to do then I would get better and better at colouring.

But christianity isn't about learning how to live within the lines, it's about the joy of colouring.

9. Childlike faith

Let's remember the vocabulary of children – which includes hugs, winks, tears, squeezes, laughter, screaming, jumping, hopping, skipping, dancing, silence. We don't always need words.

Children ask for help.

Children see wonder in the ordinary.

Children play.

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