

Worlds of Wonder a Review of two books

Wonder –When and Why the World Appears Radiant by Paul R. Fleischman (2013)

Distributed by Small Batch Books, Mass. ISBN 978-1-937650-23-0

What Matters Most – Living a More Considered Life by James Hollis (2009) Gotham Books, NY (Kindle edition)

I chose to review these two books together because they landed in my life in quick succession and also because the authors seemed to me to be inspired by the same impulses: a childlike wonder at the age and indestructibility of the old laws (“gods”) that have shaped us; a delight in the extraordinary creativity of life and an amazement at the unimaginable diversity and individuality that emerges as life goes on re-creating itself. They also share a desire to help us find modern meanings for ourselves and the universe in which we live, free of the tyranny of dogma or fear. Both are superb, even poetic, writers who have read vastly and are able to synthesise their knowledge so that they serve as excellent guides as we journey in their footsteps.

Fleischman is primarily concerned to introduce us to the wonders of our physical world and the range of all that we can now see - thanks to Hubble’s telescope, which renders the vast expanse and unimaginable age of the universe visible, and electron microscopes that enable us to delve deep into the tiniest parts of cells. Not to mention, of course, the revelations of sub-sub-atomic science which are utterly beyond our senses. He takes his readers on a wonder-filled journey that launches us out into the sextillions of stars and then plunges us into the even more unfathomably huge numbers of cells at work in our own bodies. The mind simply cannot grapple with such vast numbers. In the process we are invited to know just how much we now know about the energy/matter that forms and informs all of life. We are also reminded that there is even more we do not yet know and that what we do know is so difficult to encompass we inevitably need to fall back on “wonder” as our most useful response.

Wonder is a form of courage, because we all have tendencies to dismiss whatever is puzzling, and to believe whatever is socially sanctioned, soothing, acceptable. (p.314)

The detail and complexity of what he offers, helps us to understand exactly how we are literally both intimately and intricately a part of all that is and yet retain our own stoutly defended “self”, even at the level of anti-body production.

We have a sense of self because we have skin and because we have DNA. We are messengers carrying big briefcases, or laptop files. From the past to the future, every life is a packet of skills and advice. We are temporary but we are not arbitrary. Our desire to speak and to be heard is a psychological analogue to the biological message which every life strives to transmit. (p.313)

Finally, Fleischman offers what he calls a *constitution of wonder* and sets out 20 principles through which we may understand ourselves and our world. He names these the *Twenty Luminous Jurisdictions*. They are philosophic/psychological precepts arising from our current knowledge and designed to help us find the courage we need for the full range of wonder –

Our wonder in life is often muted by our difficulty accepting reality as it is. Dark wonder is the ability to accept destruction as the counter player to creation....The dynamics of destruction, followed by renewed creation, without rest, in all sizes and domains, is the source of wonder.

Although Fleischman is sounding a clarion call exhorting us to “wonder” as a perspective, a process and a modern meaning for humankind, he soberly reminds us that

The fact that the community of wonder has members everywhere does not mean we are in ascendance. Nowhere today is fully free of the twin tyrannies of infantile narcissistic fantasy, and of hate-filled insistence on a local superstition. (p.320)

It takes Hollis, of course, to make us pause and reflect that it is not only “nowhere” but “nobody”. With his Jungian analytic experience, he points to the *nervous tyrant within each of us that may rise up at any provocation to stifle dissent (p26)*. As a species we have great difficulty handling ambiguity. This indeed, can be used as a measure of the psychological maturity of individuals and groups. How much ambiguity can they handle?

So Hollis, like Fleischman, is inviting us to step into a mature and modern story that calls for wonderment and courage. He talks about the four *great orders of mystery: the cosmos, nature, the tribe and self* seeks to help us explore them, not via the discoveries of modern science (though he is well aware of these) but via that great unknown, the unconscious, which connects us with so much more than we can ever hold in awareness. Dreams (and other processes) offer us doors and pathways and he gives some wonderful examples of work with his clients, often exclaiming in amazement and wonder, *Who would make these dream images and scenarios up?* Poets, artists and philosophers too have travelled that realm and he quotes them freely and profitably.

For Hollis the soul (psyche) is the *organ of meaning* and the soul's agenda is *transcendence, transformation, connection* so that we are ever challenged to create new meanings. Although Fleischman does not use the word soul, he talks about life in those same terms and for all that they are following different paths, the similarity of their journeys become clear. This is all the more clear when Hollis talks about his modern understanding of the *old gods* in terms of energy.

The ancient archetypal imagination intuitively understood energy systems in ways that contemporary physics is only now enabling us to reappropriate. So, in dealing with our human condition we need to observe and respect ...energy that is forever creating, destroying, changing. It is these energies, these old gods, present in all life, and reflected in our own composition, both physical and psychological that call us to life, to wonder... and to go on wondering.