IN SEARCH OF WONDER  by Katherine Paterson


Last Saturday morning, our three-year-old grandson was lying on his stomach on our deck, waiting for a chipmunk to appear. I was nervous, knowing that three-year-old patience is limited and that chipmunks, unlike grandmothers, do not live to please. But his patience was rewarded. A chipmunk came scurrying out from under a rock and scampered across the yard into the woods. "Did you see it?" I cried. "Wow," Carter said, beaming. And added, because he is a literate three-year-old, "'Wow.' Just about all he could say was 'Wow.'"

For those of you not as literate as my grandson, the quotation is from Lily's Purple Plastic Purse, by Kevin Henkes. I have been thinking of Carter and Lily and Mr. Slinger all day as I've listened to all the presentations. What a day! "'Wow.' Just about all she could say was 'Wow.'"

During Tony Watkins's lecture this morning, I was reminded of a quotation from Leon Garfield that seems particularly important for what we are thinking about this week. "Edward Blishen," Garfield says, "has a good phrase for books that are right for children. What they have in common, he says, is a young eye at their center. No matter how beautifully observed an incident may be, if it is solely an adult's view of young behavior, it passes inches over a child's head and heart. Gulliver's Travels may be read by the young, while 1984 is not suitable. Both are satires; both are fantasies; yet Swift has a sense of wonder (a property of Mr. Blishen's 'young eye'), and Orwell has not. Swift has anger (again a property of youth), while Orwell has only bitterness.

"Is it, then, that the young reader requires optimism in one way or another and is bored or repelled by the lack of it? It is tempting to think that that is all there is; but optimism is not enough. There should also be a sense of wonder and a deep belief that, to the spirit, the possible is more important than the probable."

In 1997, on a freezing dark Vermont night, I drove my little twelve-year-old Honda slowly up the hill to Vermont College. For me, raised in the South, the driving was bad. The snow from the storm earlier in the day had not been fully cleared, and more snow would be coming within the hour. I finally found a parking place on a precipitously steep side street, hauled my enormous drawing board and bag of supplies out of the trunk, and started through the dark and snow toward the lighted building. Shyly, I asked the young woman at the desk inside the entrance where Drawing 101 would meet.

The Japanese have an expression that, if you've ever lived in Japan, makes enormous sense. They say of a formidable place or occasion, "The threshold was too high." For me the world of graphic art, of drawing, has always seemed to have too high a threshold. When I was young, the world was divided in half—there were those who could draw and the rest of us. I was without any doubt one of the rest of us. The ability to look at something and reproduce it on paper so that it could be recognized—let alone admired—belonged to a fortunate few, a fraternity from which I was destined to be forever excluded. Now I had boldly plunked down my money, invested in a king's ransom worth of supplies, and was determined, blizzard or not, to enter a class full of people all of whom I was quite sure were bucking for immortality in the local gallery.

One of the first things the teacher asked us to do was to write down for her what our personal goal was in taking Drawing 101. This is what I wrote: "I want to learn how to see. I want to be able to draw what I see." And then I added—so she'd understand that I had no false expectations—"I want to have fun doing it."

What I hadn't said, because it would have sounded too pompous even to me, what I really meant was: "I've come in search of wonder."

When the board of the Children's Literature New England Summer Institute chose to meet at Silver Bay, New York, the place I love almost more than anywhere on earth, I was thrilled. And when I heard the topic we would center on, I was even happier. They had chosen a theme about which I could not possibly be asked to speak, "The Green
Prehuman Earth." I have no scientific expertise whatsoever, not to mention knowledge of a world without people. People is all I know. But, as you can see, I was not let off the hook. "Okay," I said at last. "I've done a lot of thinking about wonder." That's fine, I was told. "I'll be repeating a lot of things I've said before," I warned. Words on wonder are worth repeating, they said. So here I am—not at all green and very human—inviting you to join me in this beautiful place in a continuing search for wonder.

Now I know that if I have eyes to see, I can find wonder almost anywhere. Often I don't need to search at all. It startles me on a bright summer morning when I go out on the deck of our cottage a couple of miles down the road from here and see that a spider has been up long before. The early sun dazzles the sticky silken threads. It is an enormous web—the radials extending from its hub look to be more than a foot in length, so that the web itself measures more than two feet across. It is attached firmly on my left to the Adirondack double chair that our son David rescued from a trash heap, but then, quite marvelously, the whole right side simply floats in the air. I know that is impossible. The bridge lines on the right have to be anchored somewhere, but in the morning light they are invisible. I creep up on the web, feeling somehow that I am intruding on a great artist who needs rest after a work of this magnitude, but I have to know how she's anchored this creation—and then I see a single bridge line stretching up to the deck rail nearly four feet away. There must have been a second, lower bridge line, but I could not see it. Or perhaps I stopped looking. I could hardly breathe after I found the first. I tried to imagine that tiny creature, leaping into space from the height of the rail—across the void—surely a hundred times wider than the length of her body—leaping to attach that tiny trail of silk to the chair across the deck so that she could build her incredible web beside it. Needless to say, no one touched that web. It disappeared, finally, as all webs do, but not by human agency.

The poet A. R. Ammons obviously shares my love of spiders. In his poem "Identity," he muses on the fact that you can discern the species of spider by looking at the center of a web—every species has its own trademarked hub and center—but around the periphery, where the spider must find anchor for her web, there is perfect freedom—to adapt each web to the setting available.

if the web were perfect pre-set,
the spider could
never find
a perfect place to set it in: and

if the web were
perfectly adaptable,
if freedom and possibility were without limit,
the web would
lose its special identity:
the row-strung garden web
keeps order at the center
where space is freest (interesting that the freest
"medium" should
accept the firmest order)

and that
order
diminishes toward the
periphery
allowing at the points of contact
entropy equal to entropy.

While I'd rather not think of our double Adirondack chair, not to mention our deck railing, as in the process of decay and as elements of disorder (my dictionary's definition for the word entropy), still, as points of contact for the spider's creation, they are so—those irregular disorderly features of the environment onto which she attaches the periphery of her web. She can use anything handy for that. It is in the center that she will show her true nature, reveal the order to which she belongs.
My search for wonder began early on. I cannot remember the first time I heard the Eighth Psalm read, but it so exactly expressed my childish feelings about the universe that I memorized it, King James language and all.

When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou has ordained;
What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?
For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour.
Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet:
All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field;

The fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas.

O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!

It is not politically or in fact theologically correct to speak of humankind's dominion of nature. We need, indeed the Scriptures instruct us, to see ourselves as stewards of the natural world, not controllers, not dominators. And yet it is wonderful to contemplate our role—a little lower than the angels, the Psalmist says. It gives us enormous responsibility as well as food for wonder.

I fed upon wonder as a child, and when I'm deprived of it, my inner life feels as sterile as a barren landscape and my outer life feels as bombarded with junk as a suburban mall. And it seems to me when I look at what children today are frantically occupying their lives with, that it might be that they, too, feel that inner starvation for a sense of wonder. Could this be the reason they have gone crazy over Harry Potter? Is there something in J. K. Rowling's books that feeds their hunger?

At this point, perhaps, I should say what I mean and do not mean as I speak of wonder in the context of this talk, for the word wonder, as we all know, can be used in a number of ways.

Why, at this very moment, some of you may be thinking: I wonder what on earth she's going to say next.

Dr. Annabel Profitt, in an article on the subject of wonder, talks about three uses of the word. The first is wonder as curiosity. I wonder what makes a car go. Why do things work? David Macaulay has done much to satisfy children's hunger in that regard. Children do want to know how things work. They are curious. They do wonder why. I have a number of well-worn books on my shelf seeking to slake that kind of thirst: The Why Book of Weather or Frequently Asked Questions About Nature. It is this kind of wonder that has led to humankind's long love affair with the sciences—the hunger to understand. If only we could understand, then...

One morning while I was working on this talk, the banner headline on our newspaper read GENETIC CODE COMES TO LIGHT. J. Craig Ventner, the chief scientist working on decoding the human genome, said: "Today marks a historic point in the 100,000-year record of humanity. [The achievement] carries humankind across a frontier and into a new era." Dr. Francis Collins, the rival scientist working on the same project, said: "We have caught a glimpse of an instruction book previously known only to God."

Wonder, curiosity about human life led us into this exploration. We now have the knowledge we sought. Knowledge is power. And we want to be powerful. And here lies the danger. A thirst for knowledge of the building blocks of the universe led human beings to build weapons capable of destroying all life (with the possible exception of cockroaches); what will knowledge of the secrets of life lead us to do? "This is just the beginning," another scientist said. "We have blazed the trail, but we have not yet started to travel it yet and explore the vast natural resources that are along the way." But who is asking where that road will lead? Who is asking that we take a sense of caution and humility along on the journey? Curiosity has killed more than cats.
A second use of the word *wonder* is wonder in the sense of marvel—a wonder is something startling, extraordinary, not to be expected in the common round of things. A computer is a wonder the first few times you encounter one. Recently I saw a television special on the telephone. Alexander Graham Bell went to the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia to show off this marvel, which is now in all our houses—as ordinary a piece of equipment as a cookstove, which 125 years ago was a wonder itself.

I remember when I came back to the United States after four years in Japan, the last two spent in a house in rural Shikoku. I went into my parents' bathroom and turned on the left-hand faucet, and out of it poured hot water. The idea of hot water pouring out at a touch seemed like a miracle to me. "I will never get used to this," I vowed. But of course, within a week or two I was turning on the left faucet with never a thought unless my sister's shower had taken too long and the left faucet was running as cold as the right.

As Thomas Green says in *The Activities of Teaching*:

> Wonder aroused only by sensational things is satiable, because they have a disgusting way of becoming usual and ordinary. When men find occasion to wonder only at the extraordinary or spectacular, it is the surest sign that wonder is already dead.

A few days after the words "Some Pig" appear in the web and save Wilbur's life, Charlotte, you will recall, calls a meeting of the animals. "I need new ideas for the web," she says. "People are already getting sick of reading the words 'Some Pig!'" Charlotte is a real student of human nature. Give people a miracle one day, and three days later they'll come looking for a bigger one.

One of the most disturbing elements of our society, it seems to me, is the demand for ever more and greater marvels and thrills. The car, the motorcycle, the jet plane soon pale. We want more, faster, more dangerous. Till the next thing you know, we're bouncing over an abyss, suspended from our ankles by a wide rubber band. I'm not sure what you do for a thrill after bungee jumping, but believe me, someone will think of something more idiotic soon.

Our movies must become more violent, more shocking, because what shocked last year no longer has the power to arouse in us that same level of response. We keep thinking that sometime the wall will be hit, but no, it seems there are unimaginable things yet to be exploited, which will become, by next year, ho-hum.

We decry the scary series books for children, murderous computer games, violent TV and movies, not to speak of actual violence and pornography, but maybe we should step back and look at what this lust for frenzied distraction is saying to us. Isn't the need for ever-increasing decibels of shock a scream for something else? Isn't there in this cry a hunger that continues to be unsatisfied because it is being offered the wrong food? Have our children asked for bread and been given stones? Have they asked for eggs only to receive scorpions? More and more of worse and worse or even more and more of spectacle and marvel will not, cannot ever satisfy the hunger for wonder. To continue the quotation from Thomas Green:
The wonder that is ceaseless, that can never be exhausted, has always to do with what is usual and close at hand; for the marvel of a thing has less to do with its frequency than with its contingency.

We are speaking here of another kind of wonder that would be bread and meat to our children but which, I fear, in the noise and clamor of our age can hardly be found, for this kind of wonder asks of us quiet and time and close attention.

One human being in *Charlotte’s Web* seems to understand this.

"Have you heard about the words that appeared in the spider's web?" asked Mrs. Arable nervously.

"Yes," replied the doctor.

"Well, do you understand it?" asked Mrs. Arable.

"Understand what?"

"Do you understand how there could be any writing in a spider's web?"

"Oh, no," said Dr. Dorian. "I don't understand it. But for that matter I don't understand how a spider learned to spin a web in the first place. When the words appeared, everyone said they were a miracle. But nobody pointed out that the web itself is a miracle."

Yes, wonder comes in many guises, many of them debased, but let me direct you to what your friend and mine, Margaret Mahy, had to say on the subject in a lecture she gave in 1989. Margaret tells how when she was a child, she read in a family encyclopedia the then "scientific fact" that the world had once dropped off the sun and that it would someday come to an end. She pompously asserted this fact in the schoolyard, only to find herself chased home by unbelieving, irate schoolmates who were intent on drawing blood. "Yet," says Margaret,

...though the scientist who advised the editors of *Arthur Mee’s Encyclopedia* about the beginning of the world had made what I now take to be a genuine mistake, it was a mistake that fixed my attention in childhood, and (it is even tempting to think) enabled me to see something true which stayed true, even when the information turned out to be false. If so, the true thing was wonder ... and so I have come to think wonder must be a part of truth, but a part which our physical systems are anxious to conceal. A perpetual state of wonder and desire (which seems to me the truest state to be in, confronted with the universe) is certainly not the most practical state to try and live in. We are biologically engineered to have the wonder filtered out of our lives, to learn to take astonishing things for granted so that we don't waste too much energy on being surprised but get on with the eating and mating, gardening, feeding cats, complaining about taxes, and so on.

Yet if you know Margaret, you know that biology has failed to filter out the wonder. She is, I believe, one of the most intelligent people I have ever known, but this enormous intellectual sophistication is coupled with the most
winsome childlike wonder. To be with her is to know the joy of constant new discoveries and a delight in the marvels of the everyday.

Margaret Mahy, Thomas Green, and Dr. Dorian are talking about the kind of wonder that Rachel Carson wrote about in her book *The Sense of Wonder*. It is the kind of wonder that is drawn to the everyday, the ordinary, and sees in the broken seashell the link to the mystery out of which we are born. This is the kind of wonder that is all about us here in this place. We just need to open the eyes of our hearts.

A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood. If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children, I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength.

But the world is a bit short on good fairies these days. So who is to take their place? Who is to make sure that our children's sense of wonder grows indestructible with the years? We are. You and I. And since our concern tonight is books for children, it is here in the books we write for them, publish for them, buy for them, read to them, share with them, that we can begin our search for wonder.

Let me suggest that there are at least three aspects of wonder that we may find in a well-told story for children—not only in a children's book, of course, but also there. There is the wonder of nature and human nature—we call it setting and characters. There is the wonder in the telling—language, style—how the story is told. And there is the wonder behind and beyond the story—the meaning of this story that ties us to the mystery of the meaning of our lives and of all creation—the story's shape, flow, and theme.

Most of you can remember as I can the experience of reading *The Secret Garden*. Now, strictly speaking, this story is not fantasy, though there is certainly the feeling of magical kingdoms about it. We, like Mary, think of Dickon as being magical—but we know of children like that. Some of you probably had children very like Dickon. I know I did. No, what Frances Hodgson Burnett has achieved is a sense of wonder that puts us in awe of ordinary things—not a sense of magic. She makes us tremble at one of the most commonplace experiences—the growth of a flower. And yet, ordinary as it is, it is wonderful. That dried brown oniony ball that holds within itself a hibiscus or hyacinth or daffodil or tulip comes to glorious life. Just as in my beautiful new grandson there is the wonder of the meeting of two microscopic cells that have become in a few short months a living, breathing, thinking, feeling human life—a person, a member of our family.

When a beloved theology teacher I had was near death, he said to me that people were always asking him if he believed in the next world. He looked at me, his eyes as wide as a child's. "I can hardly believe this world," he said.

The best books for children help us to look at the natural world with this same kind of awe. In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis tells about his earliest encounter with Beatrix Potter's book *Squirrel Nutkin*. On reading it, he was filled with an enormous desire—for he knew not what. Perhaps, he writes, Milton's "enormous bliss" of Eden is the best way to explain the feeling that overcame him, which he says "... I can only describe as the Idea of Autumn. It sounds fantastic to say that one can be enamored of a season, but that is something like what happened ... the experience was one of intense desire. And one went back to the book, not to gratify the desire (that was impossible—how can one possess Autumn?) but to reawake it..."

Just as books can tie us to the wonder of the natural world, they can tie us even closer to the wonder of human nature. All of us know characters from books that are more real to us than most of the people in this room—Anne of Green Gables, Long John Silver, Ramona Quimby, Peter Pan, Harriet the Spy, Jo March, Natasha Rostov—you have your own list. As readers, we want to ask the authors, alive or dead: How do you create a character like that? A character so memorable that long after the memory of the plot has dimmed, the person is still so real that you could carry on a conversation with him or her?
But as a writer, that seems to be the wrong question. When I'm writing a book, I feel less that I'm creating a character than getting to know a person. When I was trying to figure out how to write the book that eventually became *Jip, His Story*, I was doing the kind of desultory research that seems the only kind I know how to do—reading this and that, and trying to get a picture of the time and place, searching for stray facts that would give my story substance and verisimilitude. Because I had the notion that the book was going to be set on a nineteenth-century Vermont poor farm, I began to read old town histories, looking for references to poor farms.

In a history of the town of Hartford, I found one of those entries that taxes all the meanings of the word wonder.

A man named Putnam Proctor Wilson and his family came onto the town poor rolls in 1811, and they were at first cared for by various local families. In 1814 "it became necessary to place Mr. Wilson in irons," and the selectmen employed a Jonathan Bugbee to make a chain and foot locks for him. In 1816 the selectmen gave an order to a David Trumbull to saw planks to make a cage for Wilson, who was being kept at the time in a private home. Then, the records show, in 1832 the town contracted with a man named Lovell Hubbard to build a new poorhouse on some leased land. Hubbard was paid $518 to build the house and $55 extra to add an apartment containing a cage for Putnam Wilson, and that year the town's poor were moved into the new house, including Putnam Wilson and two others who were judged insane. "These men," according to the anonymous writer of *The Selectman's Journal*, which the town history quotes, "were raving crazy most of the time, and there caged up like wild beasts in narrow, filthy cells. The writer often saw them, and viewing their scanty, ragged attire, their pallets of straw, and their pitiable conditions, was impressed with the conviction that the inhuman treatment to which they were subjected, was sufficient of itself to make lunatics of all men. Poor old Putnam," he goes on, "had some rational moments and was always pleased to see children, to whom he would sing the old song, 'Friendship to every willing mind, &c.,' as often as requested."

I salute the anonymous writer of *The Selectman's Journal* for his compassionate account of the town's poor and insane, but pity was not my reaction to his account. It was wonder—wonder that such a man as Putnam Proctor Wilson could be—a man so frightening that leg arms were not sufficient for the adult populace to feel protected from his ravings. He must be confined to a cage—and yet, this fearsome lunatic loved children, and children, somehow, were not so afraid of him. Why, they would come and listen to him sing and beg him childlike for their favorite songs. It is of particular importance to me that several friends who have battled mental illness have told me how much they love Put. I do not believe that I have sentimentalized the terror of such a life, but I hope I have shared with readers the beauty—the wonder of the man.

Another gift we owe to children in books is the wonder of language. Sometimes we forget this in our eagerness for children to "understand." Thus we see easy-to-read versions of Beatrix Potter or simplified editions of *Little Women*. But understanding must always mean more than decoding. And often we understand with our hearts wonders we cannot precisely decipher intellectually. Her elegant language is one of the reasons Beatrix Potter has endured—the absolute beauty and charm in the way she tells her very simple stories.

Stephanie Tolan, Steve Liebman, and I did an adaptation of *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck* for the stage. Plots are thin in Potter, as you soon realize when you are trying to adapt one of her stories dramatically, but the language is rich. For example, in the lovely scene where we find Jemima explaining to the gentleman with sandy whiskers that she is not lost but simply looking for a nesting place where her eggs will be safe from the farmer's wife, who always takes them away and gives them to a hen to hatch, we read: "Jemima complained of the superfluous hen." Both Stephanie and I whooped with delight. Superfluous hen, indeed! Now, the word superfluous does not occur in basic readers for first-graders, but what a delicious word, one I suspect that only Beatrix Potter would know to choose.

I'm always puzzled that so many people who review children's books think that they've reviewed the book if they've revealed the plot. This is especially annoying if you've tried to write a book with a few surprises in it. But a sketch of the plot rarely tells us what we need to know—which is if this is a story worth reading. One of my writer friends was complaining the other day that she never knows what to say when people ask her what her book is about. The best book in the world doesn't make sense when you try to tell what it's about, she said. For instance, it's about this runty
pig that the farmer is going to ax, except his daughter throws a fit, but she wouldn't have been able to keep the pig alive very long if it hadn't been for this spider who can weave words in her web. So the pig lives, but the spider, she dies.

But listen to it in E. B. White's words:

Mr. Zuckerman took fine care of Wilbur all the rest of his days, and the pig was often visited by friends and admirers, for nobody ever forgot the year of his triumph and the miracle of the web. Life in the barn was very good—night and day, winter and summer, spring and fall, dull days and bright days. It was the best place to be, thought Wilbur, this warm delicious cellar, with the garrulous geese, the changing seasons, the heat of the sun, the passage of swallows, the nearness of rats, the sameness of sheep, the love of spiders, the smell of manure, and the glory of everything.

Yes, part of White's story is fantasy, but the wonder of it is grounded in the wonder of the natural world, the changing of the seasons, the marvel that a spider can spin a web at all, the cycle of birth and the inevitability of death. It is hard for a writer who cannot use words well to convince me, much less to delight and enamor me. But White, as no one needs to say, manages to tell his fantastic tale in language so simple that a child can read it for herself and so beautiful she will weep when she does.

The third aspect of wonder that we search for in books for children is the wonder beyond wonders—nothing less than the mystery of meaning. And for this we look to the story itself—to the unfolding of the plot toward a significant theme. Story matters to us human beings. Story is the way we make sense of life.

The spider will throw her bridge lines on whatever the world offers her, but from these disordered points she will weave a web that will tell us who she is.

In his book on the philosophy of religion, Man Is Not Alone, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel lays out a task for the artist or writer as well as for the person concerned for a meaningful life: "...all things," he says, "carry a surplus of meaning over being—they mean more than what they are in themselves ... It is as if all things were vibrant with spiritual meaning, and all we try to do in creative art and in good deeds is to intone the secret strain, an aspect of meaning."

Is this what we are trying to do as we tell a story for children—"intone the secret strain, an aspect of meaning"? I think we are. Aren't we seeking to share a mystery beyond that of spider webs as an indication of poor housekeeping and pigs as potential bacon?

The true meaning of a story is not something one can extract from the story itself. The whole story—character, setting, plot, theme, language—is the meaning.

In Dublin, Tony Watkins told a Sufi parable about a Master who has just told his disciples a story—a story which, if properly apprehended, will open their minds to the next level of their training. When he has finished the story, one of the students asks the Master what the story means.

In answer, the Master asks him a question. "Let us say that you have gone to the market, chosen an especially fine peach at a fruit stand, and paid for it, but instead of giving it to you the peach seller peels your peach, eats the flesh before your eyes, and then hands you the peeling and the stone—what would you think?"

The baffled student replies: "But Master, I don't understand. Please explain the story."

Whereupon the Master patiently repeats the story of the peach.

There are two impulses in the education of children that concern me today. One is the back-to-basics slogan, which sounds almost like the acquisition of knowledge for the sake of power: If our children don't master the basics,
math, or computers, or whatever, how will we be able to maintain our position as number one in the world? But we already know what happens when our goal is knowledge for the sake of power. The eugenics and efficient annihilations of an Auschwitz; the firebombing of a Dresden; the instantaneous vaporization of a Hiroshima. Knowledge has not made our world a safer place, much less a better place or a more beautiful place.

We must, as Rabbi Heschel says, "...go out to meet the world not only by way of expediency but also by the way of wonder. In the first we accumulate information in order to dominate; in the second we deepen our appreciation in order to respond. Power," he reminds us, "is the language of expediency; poetry is the language of wonder.... The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living."

Then, as though it were the antidote for knowledge run to conscienceless power, there is a movement to teach our children moral values. Now, I am not opposed to moral values. I just don't think we're going about it the right way. If you saw the movie *Shine*, you've seen what happens to a man who worships family values. He nearly destroys his children. But even those who are not emotionally ill, as David Helfgott's father as portrayed in the film surely was, seem to think morality can be taught in sterile tales and nineteenth-century doggerel.

If knowledge without a sense of reverence is dangerous, morality divorced from wonder leads either to chilling legalism or priggish sentimentality. I am always nervous when some well-meaning critic applauds my work for the values and lessons it teaches children, and I'm almost rude when someone asks me what moral I am trying to teach in a given book. When I write a book I am not setting out to teach virtue, I am trying to tell a story, I am trying to draw my reader into the mystery of human life in this world. I am trying to share my own sense of wonder that although I have not always been in this world and will not continue in it for too many more years, I am here now, sharing in the mystery of the universe, thinking, feeling, tasting, smelling, seeing, hearing, shouting, singing, speaking, laughing, crying, living, and dying.

We are quick to think of the wonder of birth, but I think we need to share with children the wonder of death as well. In Wallace Stegner's final novel, *Crossing to Safety*, the character Larry Morgan, who is surely speaking for Stegner himself, observes that we are given a little space of time and place on earth for a short while so that we may enjoy this life with awe and gratitude and then leave this life to make space for those coming after us. In *Tuck Everlasting*, Natalie Babbitt beautifully shares with children the truth that the wish for unending life on this planet is not only hubris, but were we to attain this sort of immortality, it would be unlikely to bring us joy.

The Swedish oceanographer Otto Pettersson preserved his intense love of the cosmos and his childlike wonder at its workings until his death at age ninety-three. When he realized that he hadn't much longer to live, he said to his son: "What will sustain me in my last moments is an infinite curiosity as to what is to follow."

Wonder has a vital ingredient, which so far I have been skirting but I cannot end this talk without stating. The wonder that we seek has its grounding in profound mystery. It is the mystery of meaning beyond the universe, but also the mystery that has formed the universe. So no matter our creed or lack of it, if we are in search of wonder, we will, inevitably, I believe, bump into a mystery that is ultimately spiritual. When we ask, "What does this all mean?" we are asking a theological question. When we seek to compose a coherent plot—a story that has meaning—we are acknowledging, whether we admit it or not, that there is such a thing as meaning. We are saying that the universe is not the realm of blind chance and chaos—that, however turbulent our individual lives may be, they are not adventures down the rabbit hole, but life in a universe the ordinary workings of which are so dependable that we mistakenly call them "laws."

Meaning in a story reflects our belief that there is meaning in the universe, that no matter the disorder that frames our lives, in the center—in the place that reveals who we are—there is order. As Put knew even in his terror and heartbreak, there is a place where All is well.

I want to go back to A. R. Ammons's poem about the spider web. In the middle of this poem, the poet muses on the fact that the possible settings of the web are infinite while the center always keeps the spider's identity:
it is wonderful
   how things work: I will tell you
   about it
   because
   it is interesting
   and because whatever is
   moves in weeds
   and stars and spider webs
   and known
   is loved:

The meaning behind a spider web, like the ultimate meaning of a story, is found in "whatever is moves in weeds and stars and spider webs and known is loved." And so for me the search for wonder is a search to learn to see, to hear, to smell, to taste, to touch the old familiar things of earth and to experience all the precious perishable treasures of earth, nature and human nature, including my own life, in the light of this underlying mystery of wonder that is the source of creation and the ground of hope—the wonder beyond wonder whom to know is to love.

Back in 1925, a journalist named Mary B. Mullett went to see a farmer in a village up in the northern corner of Vermont. "The house is a big one," she wrote, "too big for his purse. By daylight I had seen how badly it needed repair. A young couple—Bentley's nephew and his wife—live in part of the house. The Snowflake Man keeps bachelor's quarters in the other wing.

"Strange surroundings in which to pursue a Dream of Beauty! And the little man opposite me seemed yet more strange, in the role of interpreter to the Great Designer.

"Perhaps that is all that some of his neighbors can see: a strange little man, in an ill-kept house, spending his life in work that leaves his purse almost empty.

"They pass by that work as unheeding as they, and we, trample with careless feet the snowflakes themselves. I dare say we all are doing the same sort of thing: going through the world, indifferent to its wonders, not even knowing they are there! More blind and deaf to the beauty of the lives that touch our own than we are to the mutely exquisite appeal of the snowflakes we crush in passing."

"On Sunday...[t]he minister explained the miracle. He said that the words on the spider's web proved that human beings must always be on the watch for the coming of wonders."