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The Evolution of Wonder
by Mandie McGlynn
(English 1101)

have always been interested in both the "how" and the "why" of the world around me. My high school math teachers were constantly exasperated because knowing the mathematical rules wasn't good enough for me – I had to know WHY the rules were the rules and exactly HOW they worked before I could internalize and apply them. As a preteen, I read Greco-Roman mythology, interested to know how the minds of the ancients worked, how classical philosophers made sense of the world in which I was floundering.

The small-town conservative Lutheran church of my childhood frowned upon my attempts to use external information to make sense of the world. They understood the Holy Bible to be the Inspired Word of God, and the only thing necessary – along with Church teachings, of course – to live a rich and full life.

I quickly abandoned my attempts to find truth "out there" in the world because I wanted nothing more than the sense of love and belonging afforded to me by my church family and the concept of God as my Heavenly Father. Writers Janet A. Simons, Donald B. Irwin, and Beverly A. Drinnien say in their book, *Psychology: The Search for Understanding*, that humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a universally true depiction of the stages of human development. The authors explain that the needs for safety, love, and belonging must be met before a person can begin to develop a sense of esteem and self worth, and before he or she can begin the process of self-actualization – the realization and fulfillment of potential.

According to Maslow's Hierarchy, the belonging and love I felt at church should have paved the way for me to reach higher levels of development, but any esteem I had was built upon a false foundation. As a "dirty, rotten sinner," I was not worthy of respect. I could not be strong without God, and without Him, I was powerless. I was a sheep in the flock, too ignorant not to walk off a cliff without the staff of my God, my shepherd, to keep me from the edge. I saw my faith and religion as all that made me worthwhile as a human being, all that kept me afloat in a tumultuous world.

In school, some of my fellow churchgoing students hid the "light" of their faith under a proverbial bushel. Not me. My faith was my life raft and I clung to it so as not to drown in the churning waters of high school. I balked, as my life sciences teacher professed evolution "Just a theory!" I thought it as the truth of how the world came to be as it is now. I revolted against traditional science so completely that for the rest of my high school education, I avoided hard sciences entirely. Instead of biology, chemistry, and physics, I used National FFA courses to meet my science requirements for graduation. Ironically, I had no problem learning Mendelian genetics in my Horticulture class. I actually enjoyed working out the theoretical puzzles of breeding a seedless watermelon or a more ergonomic banana.

In my avoidance of scientific concepts, I held my religious beliefs to be the absolute truth. William S. Moore, academian on the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, says in his article, "Understanding Learning in a Postmodern World: Reconsidering the Perry Scheme of Intellectual and Ethical Development," that educational psychologist William Perry was surprised to find through a qualitative study of male college students in the late 50s and early 60s that a person's concepts of the world in terms of Absolutes and Truth or Commitments and personal choice vary directly with his education and knowledge of the world, and that Perry developed a "Scheme" to define this process. Moore lists positions one and two of Perry's Scheme as "Dualism"

and says that these stages represent a naive black-and-white view of right and wrong wherein a person holds the "Authority's" truth as unquestionable and makes it his own, believing that anyone who holds a different view is both wrong and bad. I had not moved beyond this point by the time I reached high school, but I didn't think I was missing much.

I didn't see the need for scientific knowledge of the world – after all, I had the knowledge of God, which was far more important in my mind. Why would I need to understand the periodic table of the elements when I could look at a sunset and feel God smiling on me? I didn't need to feel the specialness of living on the only planet within light-years, maybe in existence, to host intelligent life when I knew every sparrow was meaningful to God. I was at home in my faith, in awe of Creation, and connected to every living person as a child of God. My life as a Christian was full of life, love, and wonder.

In my late adolescence, I began to question the idea that my religion was one primarily of love. Despite the efforts of my church to maintain my ignorance of the world "out there," I had begun to experience more of it, and the smallness of my religious dogma left me claustrophobic. When one of my best friends was faced with the possibility of an unwanted pregnancy, I realized I loved her more than the church's stance against choice. Another friend introduced me to the Broadway musical *Rent*. The powerful story of – among other things – gay lovers in New York City was a profound culture shock. I began to understand how strong and meaningful love could be, regardless of gender. I was losing my sense of the world as black and white.

According to Moore, Perry's Scheme defines this slight broadening of intellectual thought as "Multiplicity." During this stage, Perry says that an individual sees many differing viewpoints as an unknowable gray area, neither right nor wrong. For me, Multiplicity quickly led to Contextual Relativism, the idea, according to Perry, that reality is what we make of it. Unfortunately, I wasn't sure what to make of it for a long time.

I had spent my entire life convinced that mine was the One True Faith. If I doubted my religion, my God was at risk as well. While leaving my dogma behind wasn't hard, losing my tie to the Universe, my sense of place and meaning, my anchor in reality, was unthinkable. I sought anxiously for another perspective, another religion on which to hang the hat of my identity. Over the next few years, I sampled many ideas, some with dogma attached, some without, but my heart was broken and nothing was able to give me the deep satisfaction of my childhood faith.

When I married at age twenty, I cobbled together a ceremony from the rituals of many religions. I didn't claim any of them as my own, but the vague idea of the relativity of truth had begun to take hold of me. A church was out of the question for our wedding, and for us a courtroom was just not an interesting enough venue. We decided to hold our wedding in my future in-laws' back yard. After we had searched a long while for an officiant to marry us there, we finally discovered that a Unitarian Universalist minister was willing to follow the religious melting pot that was our ceremony script.

My husband and I remembered Unitarian Universalism and its openness when we had children. We wanted to give them the opportunity to experience a variety of truths and ultimately find their own. Since the tenets of Unitarian Universalism accept as valid all faiths that affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person and eagerly encourages a search for individual truth, we made it our family's religion. I hoped that by joining a church, my family could find the sense of community and wonder religion had given me as a child.

My children brought me back to religion – not full-circle, but in a spiral. Southern author Patricia Foster explains in her essay, "A Place at the Table," that her upbringing in rural Alabama was not only a confusing and inflaming experience from which she felt the need to escape, but also a defining aspect of her personality which fuels her writing process. Foster describes the early part of her adulthood as an attempt to simply cast off her heritage before she came to realize that love doesn't have to equal quiet acceptance. Foster says that she found she could love her childhood home

while still wishing for it to become something more. My childhood religion was a similarly restrictive experience from which I ran, but then looked back toward with longing in my adulthood. Like Foster, I ultimately let go of the destructive aspects of religion and searched for something more meaningful within it. In Unitarian Universalism, I found myself once again participating in the rituals of liturgy, some familiar, others new to me. But my new, often overly intellectual religion left me without the deep spiritual satisfaction I'd had in my youth.

My sons also led me back to thoughts about science as we began to homeschool them, and, as I had with religion, I saw science from another angle. I no longer eschewed traditional scientific ideas. Bill Nye the Science Guy became our scientific televangelist, teaching my sons and me about everything from inertia to the water cycle, and yes, even evolution. My husband and I bought children's books on paleontology, astronomy, and elementary physics. As I read contemporary cosmologist Stephen Hawking's children's book, *George's Secret Key to the Universe*, aloud to our son, I marveled at the vastness of the universe, our insignificance within it, and our human ability to understand so much – or is it so little? – of it. I might call it a spiritual experience, but truly, it was an epiphany.

Everything I had been missing since abandoning my childhood faith was here between the covers of this book. I held in my hands a sense of wonder and awe, a set of laws and rules that made logical sense and excluded no one, and a tangible connection to every other living thing on the planet – we're all made of stardust. Moore's overview of the final stages of the Perry Scheme moves to Commitment Within Contextual Relativism. Perry says that in this stage, a person defines his or her ethical values entirely through personal consideration of various alternatives and their validity. After I had struggled for so long with various forms of religion, Hawking's books brought me abruptly to a place of commitment to scientific ideas.

Hawking's adult works taught me more about astronomy and cosmology – the study of the universe at large and humanity's place within it. I learned a new story of creation, one involving massive amounts of energy, time, and just the right conditions for life to emerge. I became as eager to learn more about the physical and scientific laws of the universe as I had previously been to learn the mind of God. Maybe, I thought, they were one and the same.

After months of research, I realized that to dive as deeply as I wanted into this new pool of knowledge, I would have to take up study at a college level. I enrolled at a community college in courses that filled the gaps left by my avoidance of science in high school. I decided to pursue a Bachelor of Science in Astrophysics and possibly attempt graduate study. Every discussion about the cosmos, physics, and the mysteries of the universe left me breathless and flushed. I became passionate and full of excitement. At twenty-seven years old, my sense of wonder had finally evolved, and I had found my calling.

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