

Reflections on Wonder

4 December 2022

Good morning.

When I started thinking about the theme for the month as Wonder, I was flooded with memories involving children where I have felt wonder or felt that I was witnessing their connection to feeling. Before I began writing, I looked up the definition of wonder which is explained this way:

As a noun

1. a feeling of surprise mingled with admiration, caused by something beautiful, unexpected, unfamiliar, or inexplicable.

As a verb

1. desire or be curious to know something.
2. feel doubt.

As an adjective

1. the quality of exciting amazed admiration; rapt attention

For a majority of my career, I have worked with children. I love them. I enjoy the little moments that arise and I try to hold on to them as they warm my insides so much. Little things are utterly amazing to children and I am grateful for the sweet reminders about the little things. Most are very unexpected which makes it more delightful, right? Their days are wonder-filled as there is so much new to their lives. My hope is to share the wonder they experience and what I experience with them with you.

I remember several years ago when my son Elliott was 13 years old, my sister Susan was a foster parent to siblings Iggy and Elizabeth. She cared for them for nearly two years. During our first Christmas with them, my mother noticed that they opened all their gifts and then immediately put them away. Susan told us that when living at home, their gifts would disappear overnight without explanation or one year they were given only a bag of candy to share and were told it was from Santa. No wonder they were reluctant to do much with the gifts they received from us. How could they trust the gifts would still be there 24 hours later? During the second year the kids were with my sister, Iggy, who was nine years old, started to display anger resulting in damaging property, arguing, and fighting. As the holidays approached that year, he expressed his fears to Susan that Santa would not bring him any gifts as he had not been a good boy. My sister tried to reassure him that Santa could see his heart and knew that Iggy was a good boy who was struggling with making good choices. Nonetheless, he was really worried. She spoke about this Christmas Eve after the kids went to bed and the letters they had written to Santa were on the table with treats for him. Elliott decided to write letters back to the kids. In the

morning, the kids woke us and as we made coffee and cocoa to sit down and open our stockings, Iggy came over to us and with a shaking voice and hands, read his letter from Santa. He was halting as he read and visibly overwhelmed. Santa shared that he knew Iggy was having a tough year and could see that he was learning a lot and trying hard and encouraged him to keep trying. He hoped Iggy liked the gifts he left and wished him a good year. Iggy was in tears. His relief and awe for Santa's letter were apparent. I was choked up witnessing his amazement and, frankly, filled with my own wonder at the wisdom of my newly adolescent son and his compassion for this little boy and his pain.

For six years, I worked for a rural school district in west Michigan at an elementary building serving K-2 children. One thing kids this age cannot do is tie their own shoes. Contrary to how it seems, there are too many shoes that still have laces and when they are untied, drag on the floor collecting water and dirt, tips frayed, heels flapping off the back of their feet, and laces get stepped on with kids falling down. I couldn't stand it. One morning, I brought five pairs of my own tie shoes and my desk chair to the gym where the children ate breakfast before going out to play prior to the bell signaling the start of the school day. Kids approached me and I told them that I was starting a shoe tying club. I would show them how to tie and loan them a shoe to practice with or on their own shoes. Soon I was there three mornings a week with a mother who volunteered to help me and after they ate breakfast, kids who knew how to tie could coach siblings or peers and when a child thought they had mastered it, they would show me including tying a double knot. If they could do it unassisted, I wrote down their names and added them to the bulletin board in the gym where the shoe-tie-ers' names were added by grade. The emotions of the children at every club meeting were dynamic. I was often surrounded by little people wanting my attention. The ones who couldn't tie their shoes yet were very desperate, worried and bothered by this challenge feverishly trying to learn while the ones who mastered it were over the moon when they were congratulated and their names were added to the board. Their faces said it all when they found their name on the wall, received a little shoe charm on a chain I attached to a shoe or backpack to signify the accomplishment, and became one of Ms. McBride's helpers if they wanted. By the end of the school year, I held drawings for cool shoelaces the kids could pick from to put in their shoes. I ran the club for three years as it took on a life of its own.

As a speech language therapist working with children, I found I needed to heighten interest at times to get them refocused. One morning I was wrangling a little group of first graders and one child looked at me and I asked, "What's wrong? Is my wig crooked?" And I proceeded to readjust it. I instantly had their attention. We were sitting together at a table and I felt eyes on my hairline. One child asked, "Ms. Bride, will you take your wig off?" I looked shocked and said "Of course not." Another child asked me when I take it off and I said, "At bedtime." Another child said he didn't believe me and asked me where I kept it. Without missing a beat, I said, "On my bedpost." Now that I had their attention, I was ready to get to our work so I indicated that I would answer

no more questions about my wig that day. They felt like they knew an incredible secret about me. And now you know it, too. (Dear Reader, I do not have a wig).

At this same school, I started a punch card system for earning prizes. My students could earn a punch for coming to my room, one for following the agreements of the room (listen carefully, try your best and try try again) and if home practice was sent home and it was returned signed by a parent, another punch. When a card had 10 or 12 punches, a prize could be chosen from the prize box. Staying on top of keeping it stocked was annoying to me to manage. At some point, I added a ticket that had "Lunch with Ms. McBride" printed on it. As a child sifted through the prize box and asked about the card, I explained that a child could invite a friend in their grade and bring their lunches to my room and after lunch was eaten, they could go outside for recess or stay in and play a game of their choice. That option became the favorite "prize" to my amazement. I had to plan ahead and put a date on the back of the card for the child and write it in my calendar to keep track. For children who value time with people rather than treasures, this was a favorite choice. I loved fewer trips to the store for prizes and enjoyed their bonus visits to my room.

My final story involves my son. What you should know is that I have anxiety about my own death and feel unsettled thinking about it. One night when Elliott was three years old, he was in bed and I joined him for a few minutes to visit, tickle his face, and perform our goodnight ritual including a complex sequence of hand signs and the words, "Good night sleep tight, don't let the bedbugs bite, I love you, good night. Sweet dreams until sunbeams find you, good night." The soft glow of the nightlight on his face and his dark round eyes in that moment coupled with the peace between us brought a revelation to me that I am certain I will recall on my deathbed. It was such an overwhelming moment of comfort and sweet love and never had such a thought occurred to me before but there it was undeniable and sure. I began to cry with the thought that my final breaths would be a life review with sweet moments that were comforting and wonder-filled.

While listening this morning, did you respond to the wonderment of a struggling little boy who believes in the unconditional love of Santa conveyed through a letter or the voluntary sensitivity shown by a young adolescent? Could you relate to the tensions of learning a new skill and the stunning happiness of mastery? Do you recall learning a "secret" as a child not widely known by others that you were proud to keep about your teacher's wig or the delightful discovery of the value of an adult's time and games shared with a friend over a meal? Finally, have you felt flashes of what the end of your life may or may not hold? I hope you see the glimpses of the wonder I witnessed or felt in these stories and that you reconnect with your own stories during this month. I hope you share some with me and know that I will keep them to myself next to my wig.

May it be so.

