

Wonder, awe and teaching techniques

Kieran Egan

Introduction

As many chapters of this book have made clear, there are good reasons to believe that developing students' sense of wonder during their schooling is important to their engagement with the content of the curriculum and their effectiveness as learners.

Techniques can help teachers to make routine the engagement with wonder that otherwise relies on rare inspiration and intuition. "Wonder" and "technique" seem to many to be almost antithetical, and yet I want to write about the techniques we can develop for making wonder, and awe, more common and educationally effective components of all teachers' toolkit.

For ancient Greeks, who divided up for us much of our conceptual world, *techne* was used to refer to a skill, a craft, or an art, with a suggestion always of practical uses rather than of the theoretical world of *episteme* or theory in general. At least that is the way we tend to interpret *techne* as a result of the re-shaping of our conceptual world over the millennia since Plato and Aristotle launched their project to revolutionize the way people think. For Plato, the running of his ideal Republic required its leaders to be able to interpret the forms of Justice, and other large concepts. The intellectual skill required for this, we might think, highly abstract and theoretical activity requires, he argued, the appropriate *techne*. Aristotle, who is more commonly referred to as a source of a definition of *techne*, gives his most extended account of it as one of the valued components, or virtues, of thinking (along with *episteme*, *phronesis*, *sophia*, and *nous*:

Nicomachean Ethics, 1139b15). Aristotle's use of the term is usually translated as "craft" or "art," suggesting again a more modern sense of a distinction between the purely theoretical and purely practical. But Aristotle's sense of *techne* also carries some of the complexity that we may see in Plato's varied uses of the term. It does involve certainly a general practical reasoning, but when Aristotle discusses, say, what is required for sound medical knowledge and practice, we find him using the terms *techne* and *episteme* almost synonymously, and he contrasts them with *empeiria*, which is the kind of limited knowledge and skill available to someone who has experience (but lacks *techne* and *episteme*). That is, the empirically equipped medical practitioners can prescribe certain treatments based on their past experience of what seems to work in specific cases that look alike, but they lack the more complex understanding and skill that come with the other forms of thinking and understanding of medicine. So *techne* is more close to *episteme*—the most refined theoretical understanding—than it is to the kind of empirical knowledge and craft with which it is usually equated.

Well, this odd slog through some old Greeks and their refined distinctions needs some justification. My point is to suggest that the casual way in which we tend to see techniques in education as subservient second-cousins to our sense of aims and our ideals for helping generate a sense of wonder in our students about the contents of the curriculum is misguided. A number of chapters in this book, of course, do describe techniques and practices that may be considered crucial in evoking wonder, but what I want to do here is focus simply on how we can see wonder as a *techne* proper to everyday teaching, and to recognize that the techniques of evoking wonder are not simply practical matters but that the appropriate techniques are caught up, of necessity, in understanding

how wonder works and what it means. Clarifying something about how wonder works and what it means is, I think, made easier by considering its related educational virtue, a sense of awe.

The senses of awe and wonder

The other great historical influence on our sense of wonder is Romanticism. We see within Romanticism a kind of ambivalence between the imaginative attraction towards myth and fantasy on the one hand and a focus on the particularity of the real world on the other. This ambivalence seems to be a central characteristic of romance, and a commonly observed feature of students' mental lives, particularly in the middle-school years. In Romanticism, and in many middle through secondary school-aged students, one prominent exemplar of this tension is captured in the figure of the hero.

A hero is, it has no doubt been said before, a partially domesticated god. Gods absolutely transcend the constraints of humanly perceived reality; heroes are caught within the natural order but they transcend the constraints of fear, ignorance, powerlessness, or whatever, that hem in our everyday lives. By associating with their courage, wisdom, or power, we pulley ourselves along a little in their direction, or we vicariously enjoy transcending the limits that shape our humdrum lives. (“Speak for yourself,” I sense you saying.) The pulleying activity works only if we also are aware of the techniques whereby we can do this, especially if “this” is developing a sense of wonder.

Another aspect of this attempted romantic transcendence of mundane reality and experience is the capacity to perceive the world with awe and wonder. Developing this capacity is also a technique we can work to develop in ourselves and in our students.

Awe is an "overflow of powerful feelings" that results from confronting everyday features of the world and experience as simply external forms of some internal mystery. The external features of the world and experience contain many problems and puzzles that we may rationally seek to explain, such things as the structure of the physical world, the origins of life and the universe, why the bread always falls butter side down, and so on. But beyond these there is the mystery of why there is existence rather than non-existence, or, as Leibnitz put it, why there is something rather than nothing. When we face the underlying mystery rather than the superficial puzzles, we have no applicable methodologies of inquiry and our only available response as the reality of the mystery becomes meaningful is awe. Most commonly people have directed their sense of awe to religion, and one may say indeed that awe is the prime religious emotion. And while God in various forms has commonly been the object of this sense, awe also finds many other kinds of expression. Whether it is the pantheism that some claim to observe in Romanticism, or Wordsworth's overflowing emotion on seeing daffodils or mountain streams, or the farmer on a summer evening filled with unnameable emotion as he watches the sun set on his ripening wheat, or the mother watching her sleeping baby, or any of us feeling some sense of ecstatic awe at times of fullest meaning, we recognize a quality of human experience that enriches our lives. It is a quality connected with love, and it is when our experience is infused with this emotion that we most understand what it means to have a love of life. It is what stimulates us sometimes to dance rather than to walk, to sing rather than to talk. And it is something we feel must be a central component of what we communicate to children in any educational program worthy of the name.

One November morning, I sat in an unheated convocation room with my fellow Franciscan novices waiting for our first lesson on the Psalms. Father Adrian, old and very thin, came in and sat at the small table in front of us. He waited for silence and began in his clear, quick, clipped voice: "If you look at any religion in operation, you will find a morality; when you look at it reflecting on life and itself, you will find a

theology; but, my dear brothers in St. Francis, when you get to the heart of a religion, you will find a song." At the heart of Judaism and Christianity, he said, were the Psalms. Whatever one makes of this, it suggests the relationship between the sense of awe that is at the heart of a religion and the enriching of experience. The sense of awe, however, reflects a mental capacity to be developed by the atheist no less than by the religious. It seems to appear very particularly early in adolescence, commonly in a passionate delight in the more spectacular natural phenomena—the mountain views, the gold and scarlet sunsets, and so on.

To be without this sense of awe at the mystery of things is to lack an important constituent of an educated understanding. To be without it is necessarily to lack an understanding of what has generated huge parts of western and eastern cultures. To be without it means that while one may be able to learn about outward features of those cultures' achievements and products, one will be unable to understand and appreciate them except in the most superficial way; they will not, that is to say, engage one's sense of awe. To be without a sense of awe is to lack a capacity that can transfigure mundane experience into something rich and strange. But to be without awe is not a result of our simply lacking some genetic element that some have and some do not; it can be developed in anyone by application of the appropriate teaching techniques.

Now I do recognize that this discussion of awe is somewhat removed from the common experience of classrooms today. Planning lessons and units, getting resources, arranging for audio-visual media, designing evaluation instruments, and so on, tends not to leave much time for considering how to stimulate students' sense of awe. My point is that it is an important constituent of human understanding whose stimulation and development is of educational importance. So any adequate planning framework and curriculum content will need to take account of it.

There is probably little point trying to push for a neat and precise distinction between wonder and awe, as they are so commonly used as synonyms. I would like to

note a difference, however, between the sense of awe at the mystery underlying the most commonplace features of our existence on the one hand and wonder at the most amazing and exotic features of reality on the other. Awe is the preservation of the sense of magic that is consistent with rationality; wonder is a related response to what is comprehensible but amazing or unique in some way. Wonder is concerned with the rationally graspable, awe with the mysteries of existence that are the ultimate and inaccessible backdrop against which the rationally graspable is played out. This is not a distinction that will probably count for much in practical terms, but it is probably useful to keep somewhat distinct from our wondering engagement with knowledge a deeper sense of awe that we need also to simulate.

Wonder is a kind of surprise mingled with admiration or curiosity or bewilderment (suggests the Oxford English Dictionary). A significant feature of wonder is the combination of exclusive attention to the object of wonder and the desire to know more about it, either because there is something rare and puzzling about it or because it is intrinsically fascinating. Wonder seems to need much less elaboration than awe, especially as there are a number of excellent accounts given in other chapters of the book. This is not to suggest that it is any less important nor any less a constituent of our educated minds, but only to acknowledge that much more has been said and written about it. And while it is not exactly a common topic in educational textbooks, it is something that most teachers readily recognize and acknowledge as educationally significant.

I have spent some time discussing “awe” because I think it overlaps considerably with the theme of this book. While not everyone makes the distinction between awe and wonder, or makes it the way I am doing, most of these chapters also deal with some aspects of awe, and our sense of the meaning of “Wonder-full” in the title of the book, also involves a sense of awe.

This constituent of education and understanding also has nothing much to do with equality of opportunity for social and economic advancement. Even so it is an important

human capacity that any educational institution should be committed to develop in students. Also, I think it important to emphasize that the senses of wonder and awe are not things to be touched on perhaps in literature or art classes only. Rather, as a constituent of any adequately educated mind, it will need to be stimulated and developed across the whole curriculum. Science and mathematics no less than poetry can stimulate our sense of awe, and can be better understood if they do so.

The exotic

Teachers are commonly told to begin with what students find most familiar. If we want to engage their imaginations, however, beginning with what is most exotic and unfamiliar seems at least as good a principle, and—I have argued (Egan, 2008)—generally a principle much better in keeping with the mental lives of middle-school aged students. As all sorts of things can be heroic, so everything is potentially strange and exotic if one can only see it in the right light. Even the most commonplace features of our environment can be seen as the products of amazing ingenuity, struggles, natural forces, and persisting energy. This is not to suggest that our lessons should induce incessant neuron-popping excitement, but that teachers might be attentive to some exotic features in the materials in which they hope to engage students' imaginations. But it is to suggest that we encourage teachers to develop the technique involved in finding in the content they intend to teach what is exotic, strange, mysterious about it, and everything has such features. The technique is required to discover these features, to bring them to the surface, and to use them to engage students' imaginations.

Relatedly, students' imaginations are stimulated and engaged by the wonderful. And, again, everything we look upon is wonderful, in one light or another. Learning to see anything in this way is a technique that can be learned. The artistry of teaching is expressed in being able to make evident to students some sense of what is wonderful about whatever material is being dealt with. Here, too, the teacher will sensibly not seek to stimulate

incessant wonder in students, creating wonder-addicts who can then not bear to deal with more routine learning. Rather, pointing up some features of a topic that can stimulate students' sense of wonder is occasionally useful in keeping their imaginations engaged while learning.

Similarly teachers might be attentive to stimulating a sense of awe about some aspect of the subject matter to be learned. The sense of awe can be evoked at any point when one can show a glimpse of some mystery underlying what might normally be taken for granted. Attached to awe is a hint of fear: basically, I think, a fear that our routine ways of making sense of the world and experience are ultimately inadequate, and that our claims to secure knowledge are either groundless or wildly mistaken. The stimulation of a sense of awe seems to me of considerable educational importance; it can provide a source of proper humility about the intellectual grasp we gain on reality and about our claims to knowledge. This sense of awe is one of the roots of irony—the dissolver of certainties. And again, one would not want lessons that constantly induce awe-struck numbness, but occasional hints of it will stimulate imaginative engagements with subject matter.

I have prudently omitted from this sub-heading another colleague of the exotic, wonder, and awe, and I might be more prudent simply to ignore it here. But, as you can see, I am being imprudent enough to discuss a related stimulant of students' imaginations in the relatively peaceful, routine, socially-quite-well-disciplined democracies of the West. That is, horror. Horror, like awe, is an emotion induced by the threatened breakdown of the sustaining intellectual frameworks of our lives. Those frameworks seem so secure to typical early adolescents that threats to their breakdown creates an attraction to horror. My concern about imprudence here is that some careless reader may think that my mentioning this commonplace of students' mental lives means that I am recommending lessons and units that induce crawling horror and screaming terror for the average classroom. Careful readers will, I trust, note that I do not do this. Rather I want to draw attention to the fact of the immense attraction horror has to typical students,

especially, again, around the middle-school years. It is (I clearly believe) no coincidence that Mary Shelley, wife of the Romantic poet, wrote Frankenstein, or that horror is a significant element of romantic literature. The only conclusion I would draw from this observation is that the protective sanitizing of everything permitted to enter the classroom is far more likely to be psychologically damaging than recognizing, particularly in placid and peaceful times and places, the therapeutic role of horror. Perhaps this might mean no more than being more tolerant of literature that includes horrific elements, and recognizing that horror, too, is a stimulant of the imagination. And, of course, one must be cautious about the potential effects of any of the above on students who may be unstable in one way or another. That caution is misguided, however, it seems to me, if it goes to the extreme of ignoring the potential of the exotic, wonder, awe, and horror in stimulating the imagination.

Wonderful stories

To see the Morning Glory or Goliath or Grendel—or the guy next door, your mother, or your teacher—as embodiments of some transcendent qualities, and thus in some degree wonderful, requires an act of imagination, in some cases more than others! To see them so is indeed an exercise of imagination and an exercise of a learnable technique. What we do by projecting such transcendent qualities onto them and then romantically associating with those qualities is to see the objects no longer as something we may simply learn about or observe but as something we also feel about. And we feel about them because, however fleetingly, we fit them into narratives with aims, intentions, causes, conflicts, ends, and human emotions. We put them, that is to say, into stories. The Morning Glory is no longer a particular weed to be uprooted, but a protagonist in a drama. The garden becomes an arena, the world a stage.

This technique of "storyfication" of the world shows both the power and the weakness of wonder. Its power is to vivify whatever it touches; its weakness is that it leaves largely meaningless what it does not or cannot touch. But as this book is about its power, let us go on, but let us also bear in mind that wonder can have a downside if we appreciate it exclusively of other modes of understanding our world; we can become sentimental about wonder and its attractions, and that is a loss to education no less than an education that omits wonder.

While appreciating something as wonderful does not create elaborated stories about whatever it is with beginnings, middles, and ends, the sense of wonder does hint at some more elaborate meaning of the object involved. Wonder at the inexorability of the unstoppable Morning Glory does not involve an articulated story, but it suggests a story; in this case, the common one in which there is a conflict between two forces bent on conquering or repelling attack. Whether we associate with gardener or the Morning Glory, or with both in succession, our appreciation is enhanced by its being fitted, if only momentarily, into an available story form or plot.

The simplest form of stories that invite a sense of wonder to develop has a hero or heroine who struggles against unattractive opponents and prevails. The events unfold in such a way that we can associate with the hero's or heroine's transcendent qualities—of ingenuity, goodness, energy, toughness, or whatever—and share the glory of their success. Given the way T.V. series have routinized the stimulation of admiration for the central character(s), of distress as they are threatened, and of that curious pleasure when they prevail, we may find our responses may have become casual to the point of being subconscious. Such stories encourage an easy association with a character who embodies

transcendent qualities. The appeal to males in particular of cowboy stories or science fiction stories commonly involves the romantic association with self-reliant loners, isolated from the securities of life, facing a generally hostile environment that neither knows nor cares about them. The Sergio Leone films, with Clint Eastwood as the largely silent hero revengefully overcoming his foes, take this stock romantic character to what must be some kind of limit, or make a stereotype of it. They clearly attract the sense of wonder involved in perhaps an immature self-reliance and toughness, while at the same time allowing a kind of "high camp" pleasure to more mature audiences.

This kind of figure has been common in romantic literature from the beginning. The archetypal romantic hero is the knight on a noble quest, meeting mysterious dangers, performing wonderfully valorous deeds, and prevailing in the end. In later Gothic romantic fiction "the crucial figure is that of the anachronistic hero, representative of an older and nobler world who survives into a world that has lost integrity and honour and who serves as a reminder of other possibilities and other values" (Morse, 1982, p. 4). Anne Radcliffe wrote hugely popular Gothic romances of this kind, which prominently included also that other romantic role of the noble but beleaguered heroine.

We do, of course, have romantic stories in which the hero loses in his struggle and we may deliciously associate with the defeat, while knowing that in some better world the transcendent quality will prevail. Such stories are quite different from tragedies; the supports of our sanity are not at stake, but are, rather, reinforced. Perhaps a judicious re-editing might bring us a better Star Wars sequence as the Faustian romantic saga of Darth Vader.

Another aspect of this association with transcendent self-reliance is evident in the common early adolescent interest in spying and keeping secret diaries, and preserving secrets and communicating them in codes. This aspect seems more common in girls in Western culture so far (see, e.g., Bowen, 1964). For whatever reasons, boys' engagements with this realm tend to focus on code-making/breaking and communicating in code and also quite commonly in magic, such as conjuring and card-tricks. A related area where boys' and girls' interests seem often to come together is that of piracy. At least this seems common in middle-class students who have access to the Arthur Ransome books, with their sea-going boys and girls and exotic female pirate chiefs like Missee Lee. Domesticated piracy, spying, diary-keeping, codes, and secrets all bolster the sense of self as secure, powerful, and knowledgeable against an everyday world which so frequently seems to embody those characteristics against the insecure, powerless, and generally unknowledgeable early adolescent self. The girl's secret diary with elaborate locks and hidden key, or the iPad documents with elaborate passwords, transforms the daily events of her family and school into scarlet dramas, with the knowing writer at the center of the web.

By turning others' actions into one's own words, in which one can ascribe motive, one gets a measure of control over the otherwise alien and mysterious interiority of others. Girls particularly, for whatever reasons, often weave worlds in their imaginative play. The roots of the tree around which they sit are woven into magic countries and elaborate romantic adventures. When the imagination has had less literary material to draw on, it may be boys or pop-stars who are woven into imaginative and romantic narratives. In more literary backgrounds it can generate worlds of an intense vividness such that reality

becomes the shadow world. This is especially the case when female lives are confined and their imaginations are allowed no adequate range of action in the world. Anne and Emily Brontë, for example, invented the imaginary world of Gondal, which became the setting for many of their dramatic poems. Branwell collaborated with Charlotte creating the imaginary world of Angria about whose history and characters Charlotte wrote many stories that foreshadowed many of the themes of her mature novels.

I should mention the Dungeons and Dragons, World of Warcraft, and related video games here, as an example of the engaging power of some of the characteristics of romantic stories. Boys particularly can become totally involved in these adventures, with masses of realistic (plausibly impossible) detail, associating with transcendent qualities, chance encounters with dangers of various kinds, and so on.

All these forms of storying can be brought to bear on the curriculum. The features I have focused on above—the transcendent qualities, horror and the exotic, awe, wonder itself, and so on—can be located in every aspect of the science, math, social studies, and other curriculum areas. The fact that this discussion likely seems exotic itself is one marker of how completely we have tended to ignore what is, after all, a central component of valued human experience.

A wonder-full curriculum

Given some of the discussion above, it would seem that a curriculum chosen to bring out the sense of wonder will likely incline us to select content that exemplifies the extremes of human achievement and natural phenomena. But it can also direct us to bring out the wonder of the everyday world around students. Much of the world is so

taken for granted that it is hardly noticed. This principle might lead us to a curriculum area called something like "The technology of familiar things." In brief periods of time, perhaps twice each week, students would focus on the wonders of, say, nails and screws. The aim would be to make the familiar strange, by sharing the human purposes that stimulated human energy and ingenuity to refashion the world, or even tiny parts of it. (In a trivial fashion some children's magazines do this by asking us to recognize familiar things when photographed from unusual angles, or when greatly magnified, etc. What I am suggesting is a kind of intellectual analog of this, in which our understanding of the familiar is enhanced by recognizing familiar elements of our environment in new, wonderful contexts.) A further extension of this idea is captured in the "Learning in Depth" program, in which students focus on a particular topic for many years (www.ierg.net/LiD); over time and increasingly intensive knowledge of a topic, what was once seemingly straightforward and known, becomes increasingly strange and mysterious, and wonderful.

Developing the sense of wonder could also incline us to provide for students a somewhat similar brief daily or weekly curriculum area dealing with a series of unrelated questions that students could raise and/or answer: Are the stars round? How can birds fly? Who built the Mexican pyramids? Why are roads built higher in the middle? What good are mosquitoes? Who made the first computer? Must all things end? Why are some people color-blind?, and so endlessly on. The purpose here is not to teach physics, or astronomy, or history, but simply to raise, without pedagogical fuss, question after question about the world. And to answer them, without the kind of pedagogical fuss one sees in "discovery" strategies. Such strategies have their pedagogical uses, of course, but

in this segment of the curriculum we are interested in raising questions and giving answers, directly, frequently, and in random order. The criterion for choosing questions and determining what kind of answer will suffice is to be derived directly from the principle of stimulating wonder and awe. One aspect of that stimulation comes from the exotic and dramatic, another, I am suggesting, should come from seeing the familiar as appropriately wonderful, and another aspect again by simply encouraging students persistently to wonder about the world, and to satisfy their wonder with a further wonder. Our questions, therefore, will make the student wonder about what may have been taken for granted; for example, how *can* birds fly? The answer, which need touch on only dramatic parts of the answer like hollow bones and the design and movement of feathers on wings, provides further things to wonder at. (This does not displace more detailed and systematic study of such questions in history, biology, mathematics, and so on.)

More commonly, however, this principle will direct us to stop and reflect on each topic, bringing to the fore what is wonderful about it. "Wonderful" is a word whose overuse has made it rather tired and empty. We are trying in this book to use it in a way that holds its proper meaning: of that before which we properly stand in wonder. Students need to meet this intensity with a curriculum that can adequately stimulate it and show it a world worthy of it. If the curriculum we offer students lacks wonder and awe, then we undercut important potential educational developments. If we do not stimulate their sense of wonder, we leave them victims of an intensity of boredom in schools, and the victims of any kind of sensation out of it. If this aspect of wonder is not properly developed, students fall easily into various forms of cynicism. And the ability to

stimulate and develop wonder in the curriculum is a matter of learnable technique, which we would be wise to cultivate.

Conclusion

"Real life was only a squalid interruption to an imaginary paradise" was how Bernard Shaw (1988, p. 191) described childhood and adolescence. It is a fair characterization of life for those who are fortunate enough to have, as Shaw did, access to the kinds of cultural materials that feed the imagination with a sense of wonder. But one sees that it is also students who are full of life and energy when caught up with their romantic associations and who become like a dull rag, overwhelmed with boredom, when having to engage the routine matters of everyday schooling. The sense of wonder grasps well the kinds of features that I have tried to characterize in this chapter, but it is poor at grasping the everyday routines; they remain relatively meaningless. The girl dragged from her wonder-full world-construction with a friend to rake leaves or the boy dragged from being a Dungeon-master to lay the table typically show that these conceptual capacities are tied powerfully in with emotional engagements. What is brought into focus by the sense of wonder is bright, larger and bolder, and more noble and better than daily life, but what it does not bring into focus is diminished, suppressed, darkened. The main conceptual problem for our developing a sense of wonder is proportion.

What I have tried to describe in this chapter, then, are some capacities, not commonly discussed in educational textbooks, which are nevertheless appropriate constituents of an educated mind. Central among them is the capacity to form associations with people, things, institutions, or rather with the transcendent human

qualities that can be embodied in, or projected into, such people, things, institutions, or whatever. We can use this capacity to see things as wonderful, to highlight and vivify aspects of the world and of experience, by associating with the qualities we find in them that most transcend the routines of the everyday world or that most resist its constraints and limits. In the vision of the wonderful, certain selected things stand out bright and clear and somewhat larger than life against a dull and diminished backdrop. The students' view of themselves, their group or gang, and their "associates"—whether people, events, ideas, games, institutions, weeds—takes on, if only momentarily, a special importance and significance, and the rest of the world, including adult mores and concerns, are proportionately considered less significant. This ability to focus on the wonderful is a technique that we can train and develop in others.

One of the central educational concerns raised by most of the great educational thinkers from Plato on was how to overcome the apparent inevitability that after the energy of their earliest years, most people's minds become dull mirrors of the ideas, opinions, and confusions that pass for adult thinking according to the conventions of society at large. How can one keep the mind awake, and not have it sink into an ossified slumber—mashing metaphors—reflecting back whatever are the conventions of the time? Whitehead described all western philosophy as merely footnotes to Plato. What is lost, it seems reasonable to claim, is the sense of wonder, the sense that allows us to continue to see the world as wonder-full. One of the greatest educational thinkers, who is largely ignored because he foolishly wrote his educational ideas in incomparable verse, is William Wordsworth. He expressed the problem vividly. He began by recalling that in his earlier remembering:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparell'd in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.

But he also recognizes now in his adult experience:

But yet I know, where'er I go,
That there hath pass'd away a glory from the earth.
.....
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

Well, he suggests that what is a common feature of our experience in early youth, in retrospect, is that:

Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy,

Until:

At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.

This is a poetic way of putting the problem we seem to recognize too little and have few apparent remedies for. The authors of this book suggest that the remedy is keeping alive the sense of wonder, because it is one of the great stimulants of the

imagination. This sense of wonder and imagination are not opposed to the development of rational forms of thinking—rather they give rationality energy and enlarge its power. As Wordsworth noted in his main educational treatise, that imagination is “amplitude of mind,/ And Reason in her most exalted mood.” (*The Prelude*, VI, ll. 107/8)

The socializing that custom and conventional ideas performs on us is of course crucial to making us social beings, able to get by among our fellows. But, if we are not careful, that weight of convention and custom seeps through our whole lives, heavy as frost, and that distinctive Western enterprise we call education is frozen at the start and cannot get adequately underway. Wordsworth's answer, which I am drawing on, is for a particular energetic kind of understanding which begins to build rational thought through the activity of our imagination and our sense of wonder. It is a matter of developing appropriate techniques, and I think we should make such techniques prominent in the training of teachers. Examples of how this may be done can be found on the website of the Imaginative Education Research Group (www.ierg.net). The technique, and general principle underlying the work of the IERG, is that it is not so much a matter of adding wonder to the curriculum as it is a process of uncovering the wonder and awe that exist there already.

References

Bowen, Elizabeth (1964), *The Little Girls*, New York: Knopf.

Egan, K. (2008). Start with what the student knows or with what the student can imagine? *Imagine: BCATA Journal for Art Teachers*, 49(2), 4-7. (Reprinted from *Phi Delta Kappan*, 84, 443-445)

Morse, David (1982), Romanticism, London: Macmillan.

Shaw, Bernard (1988), *Collected Letters*, (Vol. 4), (Dan H. Lawrence, ed.), London: Max Reinhardt.