

*Recapturing Enchantment for a World in Twilight:
Cultivating Conditions for Wonder*
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Recapturing Enchantment

Starting at the beginning

When I am struggling to figure where to start something that has complicated elements (more often than not, a paper or a talk like this one!) and I have reached the inevitable panic stage of having too many elements to pull together, I remember the song from the Sound of Music that wisely reminds me: “*Let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start.*” I am still learning that telling the truth about something at its very basic level is the best way to reach the beginning, to unravel the muddle in the middle, and to eventually arrive with clarity and grace at the end with completeness. And somewhere in that process, I will remember the opening and closing lines from the exquisite poem, *The Singing Bowl*, written by the beloved English poet and priest, Malcolm Guite.

“Begin the song exactly where you are.
Remain within the world of which you’re made.
Call nothing common in the earth or air.

Accept it all and let it be for good.
Start with the very breath you breathe in now,
This moment’s pulse, this rhythm in your blood.

And listen to it, ringing soft and low.
Stay with the music, words will come in time.
Slow down your breathing. Keep it deep and slow.

Become an open singing bowl, whose chime
Is richness rising out of emptiness,
And timelessness resounding out of time.

And when the heart is full of quietness
Begin the song exactly where you are.



Holy Incantations

This poem sounds deeply resonant of *a holy incantation*, and perhaps that is what all the best poetry is. I can hear Malcolm saying it, but deeper than Malcolm's voice, I can hear the Holy Spirit saying it. I confess to you that being present and aware of exactly where I am is not second nature to me and never has been. I have to practice every single day being present in this time frame and not disconnecting. Scripture, literature, and poetry are the language that God has used to teach me how to stay here.

There is a profound mystery and wonder in what God uses to change and transform lives. To Restore. That power to transform and restore is what we can truly and rightly call a Holy magic. All the acts of God are holy. The transformation of something from one state or condition to another, no matter where it occurs is a wonder very much akin to what we might commonly call magic, if we but had the eyes to see it. Magic in the benign and good sense of something wonderful, enchanting, mysterious, and supernatural. Something we cannot do ourselves with our own common strengths in flesh or by will.

Spells to break enchantments

Long ago I read these words and they have shaped my thinking as a Christian ever since. I expect you have read or heard them, too.

"Do you think I am trying to weave a spell? Perhaps I am; but remember your fairy tales. Spells are used for breaking enchantments as well as for inducing them. And you and I have need of the strongest spell that can be found to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness which has been laid upon us for nearly a hundred years."



This passage from *The Weight of Glory* by C.S. Lewis strikes me all the more deeply as I grow older and more familiar with it. Why? Because here is an adult, deeply Christian man, who was by Walter Hooper's account the most thoroughly converted man Walter had ever met, using the terms 'enchantment' and 'spell' in an utterly serious way while delivering one of the greatest Christian sermons ever written. Lewis is using the word fairy tales in church as seriously as he references all truth. He offered no apology for using these words. No corrective excuses. He doesn't offer a disclaimer or try to frame them with an explanation. Those terms serve the message and the listener. They cut right to the bone and heart, swift and clean. Now why would a godly man use such language in a sermon like this, but for the fact that he understood the terms for what they really are? Why did he trust his listeners to understand what he was saying in this context? Why was Lewis at peace with the holiness and wholesomeness of these terms in context of rooted Christian theology?



Chesterton, fairytales and remembering – “Mysticism keeps men sane.”

I suspect that it reflects the influence of G. K. Chesterton. Lewis admired Chesterton greatly and I find that very reassuring. Chesterton, such a brilliant and magnanimous man, lived at a time when pragmatism had gained the death grip in modern Western cultures. He was a magnificent defender of the faith, a master of weaving wit and critique together into a blend of humour and observation to expose the madness of his times. He and Lewis held this in common. They used their pens like swords in a furious on-going battle to save souls and sanity from evil forces both seen and unseen. Chesterton was a genius with rhetoric, and yet he was equally at home with wonder and deeply loved fairy tales. He loved fairytales for their delight but also as bearers of truth. He prescribed mystery and enchantment as an antidote, saying that we require something beyond mere logic to transcend madness and insanity. He says in “Orthodoxy”, which I strongly urge you to read if you have not yet.

“As long as you have mystery you have health; when you destroy mystery you create morbidity. The ordinary man has always been sane because the ordinary man has always been a mystic. He has permitted the twilight. He has always had one foot in earth and the other in fairyland. He

has always left himself free to doubt his gods; but (unlike the gnostic of today) free also to believe in them.

The fairy tale awakens our minds to the enchanted, mysterious nature of the real world we live in. It opens us to the possibility that mere atoms and molecules might be full of divine glory.

*These tales say that apples were golden only to refresh the forgotten moment when we found that they were green. They make rivers run with wine only to make us remember, for one wild moment, that they run with water. ... We have all read in scientific books, and, indeed, in all romances, the story of the man who has forgotten his name. This man walks about the streets and can see and appreciate everything; only he cannot remember who he is. Well, every man is that man in the story. Every man has forgotten who he is. One may understand the cosmos, but never the ego; the self is more distant than any star. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God; but thou shalt not know thyself. We are all under the same mental calamity; *we have all forgotten our names. We have all forgotten what we really are. All that we call common sense and rationality and practicality and positivism only means that for certain dead levels of our life we forget that we have forgotten. All that we call spirit and art and ecstasy only means that for one awful instant we remember what we forget.*" GKC*

This is a perfect description of the holy nature of art and spirit and remembering. It is a call to us marshal every evidence we can of the Good, the True, and Beautiful in every element of our lives and crafts to make known the Goodness of God.



Malcolm Guite Illuminates

Nowhere have I found a more beautiful and enchanting description of the mystery of language, literacy, and the power of words, especially on this particular subject, than what is offered by Malcolm Guite. In his blog post titled *Summon the Summoners – A Good Spell*, he addresses the mystery of words and world making in his customary way that is both illuminating and inspiring. Guite says of the daily miracle of language,

“the magical way that words can summon up images, images that bring with them whole worlds, all the magical correspondences between Word and World, a magic witnessed by the way a word like spell means both to spell a word and to make magic, the way chant is

embedded in enchantment, the way even the dry word Grammar turns out to be cognate with Glamour in its oldest magical sense. But if all language is a kind of spell, it is a Good Spell (or Gospel as we later shortened that term). For Christian Faith points to a single source, in the Word, the Logos of God, for both the mystery of language and the mystery of being. Christ is the Word within all words, the Word behind all worlds.

Certainly many Christian writers have reflected on the parallels between the Genesis narrative in which God says "Let there be..." and each thing He summons springs into being, and the way, the uttering of words, the combination and recombination of a finite set of letters, can call into being the imaginary worlds, the sub-creations, as Tolkien calls them, that God in his Love has empowered us to create. It seems that being made as 'Makers' (the old word for poets) is one of the ways in which we are all made in God's image."

The way that Malcolm Guite explains this here gives us a foundation of seeing the deep rooted and expansive grace that the Holy Lord God Almighty gives us in learning to seek after righteousness, because we find it ever embedded in the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.



Meaning of the word

When I talk about the word *enchantment*, I am using it with this understanding: the word *enchantment* did not originally mean to cast a spell; it meant *to sing, to chant. To celebrate. To woo with the use of beauty. To draw near with delight and loveliness.* And it was used especially for chanting in worship and prayer. We are given a beautiful role of helping to restore the rightful and true understanding of an original word when we use in its intended goodness and its true meaning. When we use *enchantment* to mean what it really does: *to sing and to celebrate, to worship and to delight*, we wash some of the mud and crud caked onto it through time, ignorance and misuse. If you shepherd words by vocation, this is part of your holy work and calling: the restoration of language.



Three things that holy enchantment is for:

Enchantment is for restoring memory.

Enchantment is making visible beauty and goodness that has been hidden.

Enchantment is for transforming.

~ *For a World in Twilight* ~

[why we are called to serve a world in twilight]



Twilight and Twinkles

I want to touch here on a world in twilight for a few minutes.

*Twilight means "half-light". The period of time after sunset just before it becomes completely dark in the evening. It is also used to mean a way of life on the edge of open society – a way of life lived in the shadows. Another way to say this is the **dwindling of the light**, or a wilder and **more poetic use it is called the gloaming**. I would offer that Twilight is where our world is today. The last of the open light is dwindling to its close and Night is not far.*



George MacDonald is a well-spring of wisdom. I knew MacDonald's work long before I ever heard of C.S. Lewis or Tolkien. In MacDonald's book – *A Dish of Orts*, he says something piercingly relevant to our topic. He says,

*"In very truth, a wise imagination, which is the presence of the spirit of God, is the best guide that man or woman can have; for it is not the things we see the most clearly that influence us the most powerfully; undefined, yet vivid visions of something beyond, something which eye has not seen nor ear heard, have far more influence than any logical sequences whereby the same things may be demonstrated to the intellect. It is the nature of the thing, not the clearness of its outline, that determines its operation. **We live by faith, and not by sight.**"*

— George MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts*

Solar lights in the garden ♥

Perhaps the most crucial of roles for the Christian, and especially the Artist Christian, is that as the open light of day dims, of becoming increasingly visible light bearers. When the light of day fades that is when we start turning on smaller lights so can make our way through the dark hours and be able to function a little longer till bedtime. We turn on the lights in our houses. We light candles. If we have yards and gardens where we use solar lights ornamentally, twilight is the time those lights “turn on”. In the twilight of evenings, one of the things my husband Peter and I especially love to do is to sit out on our back deck and watch for the magic moment when the solar lights in our gardens come on one by one. It is the moment of enchantment in our day, watching those little lights come on as if lit by unseen fairies. They twinkle in the dark and make comforting and cheerful, what would otherwise look forbidding.



Half-light, a hard story & an enchantment to wake the dead

Twilight is not just the condition of our age. It can be a state of being we sometimes fall into individually. Sorrow, apathy, guilt, or even hope too long delayed, can wear a heart down to fading embers. Broken hearts linger in twilight, neither completely dead nor fully living. I’ve known many people like this. I have been one of them.

Let me tell you a story about a use of Holy Enchantment to bring the dead to life. This is not a story I particularly want to tell but because it bears a very important element to what we are talking about, I think it is significant to share it with you. Though I tell this story awkwardly, I am grateful for your forbearance and willingness to listen all the way through. It is not something I can talk about easily.



Many years ago, I had a beautiful son named Daniel. He was brilliant, handsome, funny, and highly gifted as an artist and as a writer. He was also passionately in love with Jesus. Daniel and I shared a particular love of epic fantasy and the love of writing stories. When he was 15 and a brand-new high school freshman, though he had been very asthmatic all his life, Daniel was given medical clearance for the first time to go out for a school sport - cross-country track. He was very

excited about it, and as it happened, he was able, much to our surprise, to run successfully through the whole season. I think he felt triumphant. Until the last race.

In the last race of the season, several things went terribly wrong. So wrong that he was flown by a Flight for Life helicopter while he was in coma. Two days later, due to the massive brain damage he suffered from oxygen deprivation, we had to declare him brain dead, and take him off life support. No amount of faith, biblical training, or life-difficulties overcome prepared us for it.

The night Daniel died, something real and true in me died with him. I believe if you asked each of his siblings, parents, and grandparents they would each say the same for themselves. That night I saw a glimpse of a darkness in me darker more utterly repellent than anything I have ever seen before or since. I did not know till that night how completely corrupt my soul actually was. No starless night sky is as dark as the chasm I saw in me and I cursed God. My God. The God who had already died for me, saved me, kept me alive, delivered me. The God I loved and belonged to. Though I was surrounded by mercies and absolutely undeserved grace, I entered a twilight period darker than all my addiction combined. Were it not for photographs of that time, besides his funeral, I would remember only two things during the next 6-months: moving with my little girl Pahtyana into the in-law apartment above the garage of a house belonging to dear friends, and an incident that happened in late April six months after Daniel died that has shaped the boundary lines for me ever since.



One day at sunset, while I was looking out of my living room window at the crabapple tree that was magnificently in full bloom in the back-yard gardens, I happened to be listening to Pavarotti singing "Nessun Dorma". I can see this vividly to this very day just as I saw it then. The living image of that tree in bloom combined with the pure perfection of Pavarotti's voice singing that song became a completely unforeseen breath of re-awakening to life. It was as unasked for and unforeseen as was Daniel's death. God spoke to me in the language of Beauty itself and brought me back to life from a state of death within me.

I don't think it was the emotion of the music, though that is certainly there. It was something deeper than any emotion, something transcendent in that moment. A pulling away of the veil

between Heaven and Earth for a few minutes. I was listening to it as an ordinary mortal but what I heard was something sublime, something beyond myself and earth and time. In that moment I heard a soundless Voice that reminded me Life transcends Death, and that neither Beauty nor Love will be bound by death in the end. It was one of those moments of receiving a touch of God's holiness and pure divinity. This was a taste of passion beyond emotion or sorrow, a single moment's fluttering of the veil between mortality and eternity. Such is the power of art. ♥

God used a language deeper and richer than tiny words to speak life to me when I could have heard nothing else. He used a holy kind of incantation to reawaken me from a death like state in my own soul. He spoke the language of Beauty without reprimand or incrimination. No blame though it was deserved. He completely bypassed my reason and spoke absolutely fluently in the language of the sublime using the larger alphabet of nature entwined with the artful work of man to make me remember what death has made me forget. The Light has come into the world and darkness can never nor will ever put it out.



Please don't think that every Artist Christian must sing like Pavarotti or compose like Puccini. Every offering of your work, when it is offered like the little boy's loaves and fishes to Jesus for the feeding of the 5000, is precious. Offer all you have to give with your whole heart. It will be more than enough!

What I want to draw your attention to is this: God had planted a vision in the mind and heart of the man who planted that tree many years before I came to live there. He was a gardener and landscaper by trade. Hearing Pavarotti sing Nessun Dorma by itself would have made me cry but it wouldn't have spoken life to me by itself. It was the sight of tree in bloom combined with the music that sang life to me. When my friend Paul had planted that tree all those years before, he didn't know that someday I would be living in the apartment at his house while dying from heartbreak. He didn't know he was planting a tree that someday God would speak through to

save my life. Paul planted beauty simply because it was what he was made to do. He cultivated the conditions for wonder and mystery by planting gardens faithfully trying to live out his faith as best he could. There is a message for us in that.

~ Cultivating Conditions for Wonder & Mystery ~

Cultivating choices and conditions

Cultivating is a deliberate act stemming out of very intentional choices. To cultivate a land, a people, a culture one must begin by choosing to. Cultivating is not a random act or set of choices. By its very nature it is a deliberate act of commitment. In that context, we must ***cultivate the conditions*** in ourselves first for wonder in order to ever be able to share it with others – one of the key ingredients is to make room to be delighted and enchanted without apology.

Enchantment is not just for children. Except that perhaps it is. Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

(Matthew 18.3) One of the inherent necessities to cultivating wonder and mystery, two essential elements of enchantment, is simply to believe in that wonder exists. It is to believe that a God so infinite that He could create the universes and dimensions, molecules and nebulas, angels and humans, can also create fairies and portals to other worlds. He is a serious God, holy, righteous, and perfect. But He is also a merry one and He loves to play.

Closing Call

Cultivate generosity and humility. Leaving room in your heart to be delighted, to be enchanted by God’s goodness is the only way you may ever experience it, let alone be able to share it. Don’t be afraid of Holy Enchantment and don’t be afraid to be marked by it. That’s part of how we cultivate. Yes, some will laugh at you, and belittle or mock you. Some will be apathetic. ***Be brave and generous anyway. Be an agent of grace.*** While some will not understand you and will even try to hinder you, some will be won over by your Christ-like ways and find themselves enchanted into the Kingdom. Some will leave the prisons of pure pragmatism and find the love of beauty in

their own soul through you at Christ's long offered invitation. Some will experience the Holy Magic of transformation and being healed.

The longing for enchantment is in our blood, friends. It is the longing to see – the longing to see again what is veiled now here in the now and the not yet. It is a blood born longing for wonder, for mystery, for holy magic, for glory and pure delight. It is a longing to re-enter the One True Story without any stain or shame, fear or hindrance. It is the longing to be more than we are now because deep planted in us is the inescapable knowing that we are made for more.

We make art that re-enchants not just through craft, but through the way we choose to cultivate and live our lives, the way we welcome others who still stand in shadows, the way we choose to be present, the way we light candles in our windows at night, the way we plant our gardens and trees, and the way we love.



Everything that we make of real beauty casts splinters of light in the world. Those splinters of light illuminate what is held in the twilight shadows. That, friends, is why we make art – to reveal what is hidden but everywhere sensed, to restore memory, to rebuild and rekindle. If I can offer us a single visual image or metaphor for our calling to the world right now, let me offer this ~ Be solar lights placed in the gardens and yards of the world, coming to light as darkness falls in ordinary places, casting comfort and cheer to ward off fear and to remind those who see that light of Home.

Twinkle brightly, friends. The world needs you. ♥



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