



TO WONDER



DURING A RECENT TRIP to India for the Law School's International Center for Law and Religion Studies, I visited the Taj Mahal, the Amer Fort, the Jagdish Temple, and many other spectacular sites. My travel companions often invoked the word *wonderful*, and after I heard this exclamation for the umpteenth time, my memory transported me back to a book I read for a high school English class.

One of the characters in Kurt Vonnegut's science fiction novel *Cat's Cradle* is Felix Hoenikker, a scientist who received the Nobel Prize in physics for his work on the atomic bomb and who later created a substance called ice-nine, which ultimately was responsible for the destruction of the earth.

Hoenikker is based on a real-life scientist, Irving Langmuir, who won a Nobel Prize in chemistry in 1932. Vonnegut worked with Langmuir at the General Electric Research Laboratory, and Vonnegut viewed Langmuir as a person who was "purely interested in truth" and "indifferent to what became of" his discoveries. Thus, Vonnegut portrayed Hoenikker as having a chilling casualness toward his frightening work.

I still recall as a young teenager reading Hoenikker's Nobel Prize acceptance speech: "Ladies and Gentlemen, I stand before you now because I never stopped dawdling like an eight-year-old on a spring morning on his way to school. Anything can make me stop and look and wonder, and sometimes learn. I am a very happy man. Thank you."

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Although the notion that innocent curiosity could lead to the destruction of the world was intended to be jarring, I found something deeply appealing about an adult who maintained a sense of wonder at the world. Surely one can exhibit this trait without also being indifferent to the fate of humanity.

Indeed, for those of us with a religious bent, wonder is best understood as a way of praising God. We all recall the prophet Isaiah foretelling the "marvellous work and a wonder" (Isaiah 29:14) that is the Restoration of the gospel. The same prophet told us that one of the names of Jesus Christ is "Wonderful" (Isaiah 9:6). After Peter saw the empty sepulchre, he departed, "wondering in himself at that which was come to pass" (Luke 24:12). More recently, Oliver Cowdery—the first Mormon lawyer—said that the experience of hearing the voice of Jesus and receiving the Aaronic priesthood from John the Baptist left him feeling "wonder and thanksgiving" (Joseph Smith—History 1:71, footnote).

The word *wonder* suggests surprise or astonishment. It is, as Vonnegut implied in the words he supplied to Hoenikker, distinct from learning. It is also, as Oliver Cowdery implied, distinct from thanksgiving. It is simply the capacity to marvel. In a time of great turmoil, wonder seems like a useful antidote to cynicism and despair.

Many of us feel the impulse to marvel at the works of God. As implied by Felix Hoenikker, however, wonder should not be confined to grand events. I have often wondered at the chain of small decisions that have taken me from a small farm in west-central Wisconsin to various places around the United States. During my time as dean, I have developed a profound sense of wonder about the Law School. I marvel at the goodness of our students, the wisdom of my colleagues, and the accomplishments of our alumni. As you read this latest edition of the *Clark Memorandum*, I hope you will take a moment to wonder at the magnitude of the work in which we are engaged.

Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. Gordon Smith".

D. GORDON SMITH

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