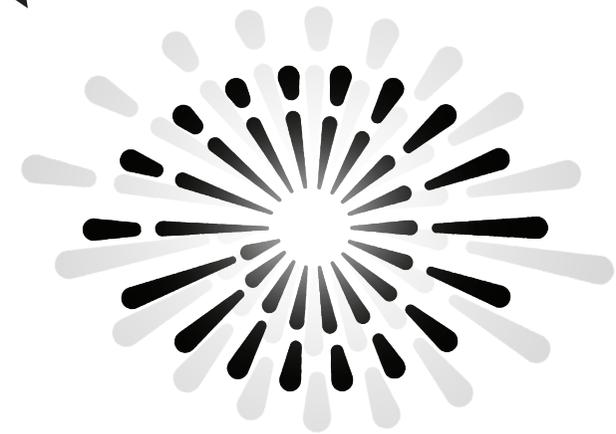


TRACKING  
WONDER



Reclaiming a Life of Meaning  
and Possibility in a World  
Obsessed with Productivity

JEFFREY DAVIS

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The background of the page is a white field filled with numerous black teardrop-shaped elements. These shapes are oriented radially, pointing towards the center of the page. They vary in size and are distributed across the entire area, creating a sunburst or flame-like effect. The shapes are solid black and have rounded, bulbous bases that taper to a point.

CHAPTER 1

**FLAMES**



I PEELED A PAPERBACK edition of psychology's founding figure William James's *Essays on Psychology* from the burnt, blackened wall of my study. The book—the one that included the early American psychologist's prescient observations on different kinds of focus, on the need for relaxation, and on different states of consciousness—had been compressed into the wall from the pressurized fountain of the firefighters' hoses. I ripped from my singed walnut desk a copy of the Buddhist psychologist Mark Epstein's book *Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart* as I tried to hold it together. In a bit of a stupor, I scanned the room and took in the soaked books strewn on the hardwoods, a heap of ash where my modest meditation table had been, and dim rays of sunlight coming in through the holes the firefighters had knocked in the walls so the flames could escape.

It hadn't been an easy summer. My wife, Hillary, and I were newly married. A year before our wedding, we'd bought an 1850 farmhouse in New York's Hudson Valley. "The House of Great Strength," we called it. I—the wide-eyed dreamer, writer, and entrepreneur—had my sunny study that looked through a wide window onto my version of Walden Pond. Hillary—the acupuncturist, professor of Chinese Medicine, and business owner—relished her home office and sunny garden. We were ready at last to build our lives, our mutual businesses, and maybe someday a family. My parents divorced when I was thirteen, and as a teenager growing up with my bachelor father, I was on my own a lot—shopping for my own groceries, caring for the house, doing the laundry, and getting to school. Hillary and I each had had fleeting first marriages, and since we both savor prolonged solitude and quiet, neither of us were certain if we'd ever find a partner we could live with for several years. This was the first stable relationship and the first stable home we both had ever had. The morning that we moved in, we sat out back, gazing upon the large pond fed by a mountain stream. I said, "I think I could die here." We felt at home.

But that first summer, Hillary had two miscarriages. Our plans for children postponed, we weren't sure if we'd ever have the family we both deeply wanted. While I was leading a retreat not

far from where we lived, I got what I thought was a spider bite. It grew black and red, and the night I came home I had fevers and cold sweats all night. The doctor saw a bull's-eye around the bite and quickly made the diagnosis of Lyme disease. The brutal antibiotics used to treat it slammed me on my back, leaving me exhausted and brain-fogged.

Then, on a July afternoon, Hillary and I had set out for a self-guided local farm tour in the hamlet where we live. By the time we left the first farm, an eerie, purple-colored storm had rolled in without warning. We pulled over and gawked at the lightning bolts that laddered from the sky to the earth. By the time the downpour sent us back home, four red trucks' worth of firefighters were pointing hoses toward our farmhouse. Lightning, the fire investigator later explained, had likely hit a black walnut tree that stands outside my study. The voltage apparently traveled under my floor, found a faulty electric wire that extends to the attic above my study, and fused the wire.

Flames roared through the room, burning twenty years of paper archives, destroying three hundred volumes of books, and melting my laptop that contained all the files of a new endeavor. This fire came way before the digital cloud, and I would never recover most of my work. Firefighters arrived, waterlogging what remained. After the smoke subsided, we were out of our home for nearly a year and a half. And within ten months, bitten by another tick, I was confirmed to have Lyme disease. Getting through the day with all my symptoms felt like trying to drive seventy miles per hour in second gear.

You likely have had your own version of house fires and tick bites—perhaps much more dire than this account—and if you have, I am truly sorry. We each construct a home of beliefs and values, relationships and work that makes up our reality. When the one you've made burns, how do you respond? How do you navigate these times when you're just starting a new dream or in the middle of one? Is the highest aim merely to get through the day as unscathed as possible? If you view life as a quest, as I do, then you acknowledge that challenges are part and parcel

of what to expect on this path you've chosen. But, whoa!—and woe!—when those challenges are relentless, accumulative, and seemingly personal.

**“ We each construct a home of beliefs and values, relationships and work that makes up our reality. When the one you've made burns, how do you respond? ”**

When I returned to our property to assess the damage, the sky showed through holes knocked out of the study's walls and ceiling. I am not one to give in easily to self-pity, but I really did start to question how it could be that once we had finally launched our dream, it could all vaporize in a flash of lightning. I wanted to cry, but I couldn't find the tears. I wanted to scream, but I couldn't direct the rage. Instead, I calmly gathered William James and Mark Epstein, bell hooks and Henry David Thoreau, and a score of poets, trying to build a familiar alliance of soul, music, and inner fire. I knew I had to muster every ounce of soldierly grit to persist, but I stood before that charred wall dizzy with both a load of anger and a shred of acceptance about what was to come next. I can only describe this mixed state as confusion, if not vertigo. I felt an uncomfortable urge to shut down.

Yet amid the black rubble, a small fluttering of yellow appeared. A monarch butterfly—likely appearing in an uncanny color morph—had slipped in and landed on a smoked-out shelf. Its fuzzy torso was the size of a baby's finger. It carried two enormous paragliding wings, etched like stained glass panels. They waved back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, like two palms pulsing in prayer.

For a moment, the pieces I was fiercely holding together inside me dissolved. For a moment, a strange sense of opening swept

through me, wide and free. For a moment, among the ruins of our simple dreams, there fluttered a small, winged hope. Feeling that beauty and recognition, fleeting as it was, I knew ultimately we would be okay, maybe someday even better.

In the ensuing months, that monarch's surprising effect would remind me of what I had been pursuing before the fire: tracking wonder. I had been attuned to ordinary magic since I was a boy and into adulthood. In my earliest memory at four years old, I awoke in the middle of the night to see three smiling sea turtles waltzing over my bed. That surreal moment lingered with me into my youthful forays. I yearned to discover such magical surprises in the everyday world, whether wandering through the woods or a book. At age eleven, I banged out adventure stories on my father's typewriter, with my neighborhood friends and me as characters. But by sixteen, I feared my imagination and capacity to experience the world through metaphors was slipping away. Yet in college I pursued writing poetry as a way to open my eyes again and express delight at the small things of the world. Writing and teaching as a young adult seemed to be the best ways to hold on to that dream space. But it was in my thirties while researching the imagination for another project that I found a name for what I had been seeking most of my life.

Before I met Hillary, I had traveled to the South Indian city of Chennai to study yoga with my teacher, Sri T. K. V. Desikachar. Desikachar's down-to-earth approach as well as yoga's flow of postures and breathing practices had unwound my tight body, unraveled my heart, and cleared my overwrought mind, but it had also reignited my imagination. Thanks to Desikachar, I discovered a text called the *Siva Sutras: The Yoga of Supreme Identity*. In a few commentaries, the scholar Jaideva Singh references a central passage that says, in essence, that the yogi who is able to experience the unity of consciousness throughout states of wakefulness, dreaming, and sleeping also experiences wonder, a joy-filled amazement at life.

Another kind of recognition struck me. That space where the waking world meets dreaming and wonder—that space has tanta-

lized my imagination since I was a towheaded boy climbing trees and recording dreams. I read the passages again, relieved that this sage was advising me that I didn't have to renounce the world to attain fulfillment. The aspiration he described was to experience the delight of being, in all its peace and fire, right here. The drive to experience wonder, I realized, is what led me to all my areas of study and eventually to my professional teaching and consulting. "That's what I've always been seeking," I thought.

Adversity and uncertainty can spur a crisis of identity and of creativity. In such confusion, with little view of the future, you can slip into despair. You can feel as if you're dropping down that rabbit hole with no control. "Who are you?" the caterpillar asks Alice in Wonderland, and she doesn't know. From that dark and low place, your creativity seems shattered, just at a time when you need hope and openness to create something new. After my house burned, I could have remained in that hole. But wonder showed me a way out. Wonder lets us receive the uncertainty rather than flee to the next easy answer.

By the time of the fire, I had already scoured the journals, interviews, memoirs, and biographies of other writers, innovators, scientists, and artists to corroborate this feeling so many of us share but have difficulty articulating. It was a project of its own unwieldy nature, not yet explicitly connected to my career as an entrepreneur, consultant, and teacher. I had identified the state of wonder as the inspiration for the philosophy that gave rise to the *Siva Sutras* as well as to the first section of the *Tao Te Ching*. I had traced the concept in the mythologist Joseph Campbell's descriptions of the hero's journey. I had tracked the centuries-long debates about wonder among Christian theologians and Western scientists and philosophers.

I had tried to find explanations of my findings in the fields of psychology and neuroscience—although the literature was scarce at the time. I used my vacation time to pursue certain threads. Hillary and I once ventured to the Rio Grande border to spend a few days among North America's largest collection of cave rock art. With the guidance of Carolyn Boyd, an artist, archaeologist,

and founder of the Shumla Archaeological Research and Education Center, we took a boat down the Pecos River. We encountered sophisticated images inscribed on stone by the people of the Lower Pecos Canyonlands over four thousand years ago. Boyd calls these sites North America's "oldest known books." I had another entry for my personal encyclopedia of wonder.

But then came the summer of lightning and fire that brought urgency to my wonder quest. Shortly after the yellow monarch alighted from the burnt, black wall, I realized that it had launched my practice of tracking wonder. I knew I would only recover from all these setbacks if I learned how to harness wonder's force for my creative endeavors—right here, right now in this extraordinarily ordinary world. I couldn't let the butterfly become a beautiful fleeting moment. I needed it to be the first notes in a new symphony I would compose.

When Hillary and I finally moved back to the farmhouse, we also remodeled a room for our three-month-old baby girl. It seemed like no small miracle that this human being came to us amid such hardship. One crisp morning, I took our baby, Dahlia, for a walk down the road. Her tiny body snuggled into a swaddle strapped to my shoulders, she took in the crimson and golden leaves around us. I walked slowly, still affected by Lyme. Just as I felt a surge of fear that I might never be the larger-than-life papa I had at last imagined I could become, I paused.

I gazed into my infant girl's sky-blue eyes. I recognized in her gaze what I had been tracking since my boyhood—a natural capacity to see what is real and true, what is beautiful and possible without the filtered prejudices and judgments of adulthood. I made two silent vows. First, I promised to relearn from her the art of not-knowing. I also pledged to live a life so rich with creativity and wonder that she would embrace becoming a grown-up, too, instead of desperately clinging to her childhood.

I now have a more fully realized appreciation for wonder, and regularly open my Wonder Eyes. Doing so has guided me through many passages in life. I welcomed our equally miraculous second daughter four years after our first, helped build Hillary's business,

recovered from Lyme, and developed Tracking Wonder into a dynamic brand consultancy and international community. Getting to the other side of trying times made me want to explore this question: *How could you practice fostering experiences of wonder in times of adversity and challenge?* My project of tracking wonder took on greater urgency as I deliberately tested out how to guide professionals, entrepreneurs, and others to harness their experiences of wonder. After testing out some new practices in training workshops, I witnessed wonder's magic on a diverse set of individuals. One insight especially stood out: *You can captivate, elevate, and enchant others. You can gift wonder.*

As I built the Tracking Wonder business, I devoted even more attention to tracking my personal practices at home and work, but I also continued to assimilate the emerging scientific studies on resilience, emotions, creativity, and innovation. I have interviewed and worked with people in many fields to get insight on other questions:

How do creative people thrive and keep open to possibility in times of challenge and change?

How do people advance their best ideas for a better world—without working themselves into the ground?

How do they keep pursuing a creative life of meaning and deep connection over several years?

It's no surprise that wonder keeps appearing in their lives.

## FIVE INSIGHTS ABOUT WONDER

There are five other central insights about wonder central to this book.

### 1. Wonder Is Fleeting Yet Enduring in Its Effects

An experience of wonder can happen like a flash of lightning or a fluttering of a butterfly, but it can have long-lasting effects. Most of our daily awareness is set unconsciously on a default mode of getting things done. We see each other and our work through biased filters. The more we experience, the thicker those filters can become. For a few seconds or minutes, an experience of wonder can dissolve those filters. We can see ourselves, others, our work, and the world around us in startling, even disorienting ways that are nonetheless real, true, and beautiful. Those few seconds or minutes experienced more often can gradually shift our general outlook and capacity to make things happen and make our lives extraordinary.

**“ For a few seconds or minutes, an experience of wonder can dissolve those filters. We can see ourselves, others, our work, and the world around us in startling, even disorienting ways that are nonetheless real, true, and beautiful. ”**

### 2. Wonder Begins with an Infant's Eyes and Evolves to Adult Perception

My baby girl's eyes looked up at me searchingly. From our first breaths, wonder is initially visual, brought to us through our eyes.

If we can imagine wonder in part as a practice to regain this childlike visual perception, we can actively disrupt our eyes' default overfamiliarization with our physical world. As we age, our brains naturally categorize things, which helps us adapt to our environment but also leads to narrowed perception. As our weary eyes become Wonder Eyes again, we can appreciate the simple forms, shapes, and designs of things. When our perception widens, we can see new possibilities.

### 3. Wonder and a Creative Life Are Partners

In fact, recent developments in psychology corroborate those ancient tradition's insights. Wonder is the singular experience that resets our outlook outward to what is possible and expands our perspective. When we actively foster wonder daily, we are less likely to compartmentalize wonder to “creative pursuits,” apart from the rest of life's “drudgeries.” We bring more openness and curiosity to whatever challenges may arise—from finessing a four-year-old's temper tantrum to fulfilling a client deliverable to holding a team meeting to advancing your dream. We lead a creative life with less inner battle and more integration.

### 4. Wonder Is Not Child's Play

A range of environmentalists, biologists, and theologians have called for a renewed sense of wonder to help us grown-ups learn how to live more openly and optimally in relation to one another as well as with the earth and all living beings. If we are going to advance our best ideas for a better world, then tracking wonder assumes a new height of responsibility. To put it simply, what we wonder at, we are more likely to care for. I want you to care about your best ideas to bring forth the best possible world. This book humbly invites you to do so.

### 5. Tracking Wonder Is a Skill and Mindset We Can Learn and Practice

Wonder, I have discovered, can be fostered and invited to accompany us as we endeavor to live, relate, and create fully in this

complex world. We can track our own cognition and experiences and thus more readily appreciate and even extend these moments of wonder. The chapters that follow provide methods for developing these skills.

## YOUR TRACKING WONDER JOURNEY

You cannot defer your own wisdom to the author of this book. It's essential that you go out and test things for yourself. This book's purpose is not only to offer a new understanding of wonder but also to help you trust your own experiences of wonder in your own full life.

Within each chapter you will find sections titled "Your Tracking Wonder Journey." These are invitations to reflect, assimilate, and test out one or more of the frameworks or principles presented. I suggest you keep all your tracking wonder exercises in one "Tracking Wonder" notebook. I recommend notebooks with dot-grid pages because they allow you to follow the form of expression wonder calls you to—whether you write, sketch, or doodle.

## SNOW

While writing part of this book, my firstborn daughter was nine years old. It's a time when most children's brains develop in such a way that they grow ever more emotionally complex, develop more awareness of their own thoughts, and become more attuned to what other people think of them. She's given to a range of complex emotions like any healthy human being. She manages to spend many of her free hours absorbed in her own creation: writing and crafting her own storybooks from paper and yarn, sewing pillows for friends, knitting tiny clothes for her younger sister's stuffed animals, and composing quirky songs. One winter morning she had a snow day at home. I was in my study writing when she peeked in to ask what I was doing.

"I'm writing about this idea I have about young geniuses."

"Oh, that's me," she said with a smile.

"Ha. That's right"

"Papa, do you want to come out and play in the snow?"

"Oh," I said, "that sounds great, but I'm in the flow here and I don't want to interrupt it. Maybe later."

"Okay," she said, nonplussed, and off she went on her own adventures.

The room was quiet again, but of course now my mind wasn't. I typed a few more sentences, but Dahlia's invitation lingered. Outside the study window, snowflakes fell and started to cover the boughs as if miniature clouds had come down to roost. It would likely be this winter's last snow. I stared again at the screen and the blinking cursor.

Who was I kidding? I had a vow to keep.