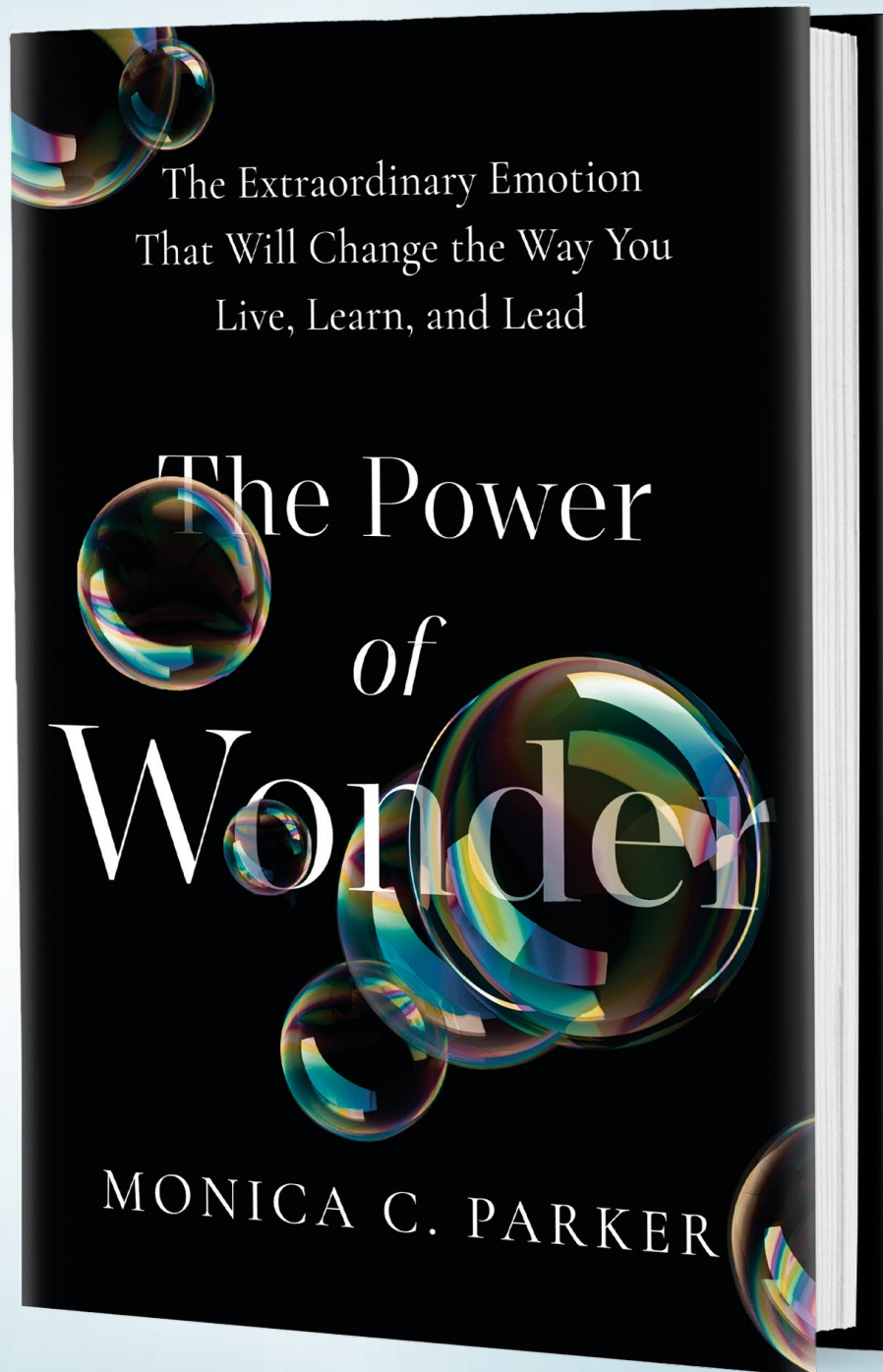


The Power of Wonder
Bonus Chapter



Relationships and Compatibility

I lived on Cape Cod for several years. Beautiful and bucolic, rich in history and lore, with fleeting vivid affable summers and long monochrome hostile winters. I was desperate to find a sense of home there, but I was just a wash-a-shore—the pejorative term used by native-born locals for anyone from away, regardless of their tenure—and was reminded of it regularly. I didn't take it personally, *per se*. My neighbor lived on Cape Cod for over 80 years and still called himself a wash-a-shore. He wore the moniker almost virtuously, as something of a hairshirt. His small-town asceticism didn't come so naturally to me, though. I didn't want to pay penance, I just wanted to belong.

As a city mouse, having recently moved to New England from the megalopolis of South Florida, Chatham was by far the smallest pond I had ever swum in. Small towns have their own inferred way of operating—idiosyncrasies, traditions, unspoken rules of behavior communicated by little more than awkward glances and osmosis. One tenet I quickly sussed was that the relationships within the community—steadfast, dependable, and unpretentious, whilst simultaneously gossipy, nepotistic, verging on the Habsburgian—were the mainstay of existence. You couldn't choose the comforting anonymity that comes with metropolitan life. Like a group of shipwrecked castaways, whether you cared for them or not, these other people were woven into the weft and warp of your survival. And in many ways, that made the “you're not from around here” outgrouping rejection all the more painful, as it was truly inescapable. It's fair to say I was not suited to that remarkable place as hard as I tried.

My best friend there, however, loved it and particularly embraced the glacial pace of the winters, passing her time in that dark season by spinning wool, a hobby I also tried my hand at. Like living on the Cape, I wasn't skillful at it, often breaking the thread or churning out sad, lumpy little strands. But she was a marvel at the wheel, and sitting, watching her spin, accompanied by effortless conversation, brandy alexanders, and a roaring woodstove, was one of the few places where I felt I had a home.

If you've never spun wool, it is a magical, almost alchemic process. It begins with taking the freshly shorn wool from the sheep. You clean it and card it (brushing out the wool so it's untangled) until you are left with big puffy clouds of wool fiber. These get delicately fed through a spinning wheel, and when all the small fibers combine in this spinning process, they meld into a fine thread that is gently pulled from the spinner (machine) by the spinner (human). It's mesmerizing how this fluff ball of tiny separate fibers transforms into a solid, durable thread. These individual threads are further spun together to create a skein of yarn for knitting, a messy chaos of fiber tamed and transformed into a recognizable whole that is then later knitted or crocheted to create some new item altogether.

The term "close-knit community" took on an entirely new meaning for me on the Cape, each relationship a thread melding almost inseparably into another. Spinning is the image that comes to mind when I think of all the various relationships that contribute to our lives. Big and small, long and short, loose and tight, casual and consequential, requisite and chosen—relationships spun together over a lifetime of experiences and then woven into the tapestry of our shared human experience. While the two people who physically create us contribute half of our personality, it's then the people who raise us, teach us, befriend us, reject us, with whom we share core experiences that contribute to the other half. These people and the relationships we share with them are the foundation of how we experience and embody wonder. And as wonder shared is wonder multiplied, exploring the symbiotic dynamic between relationships and wonder helps us become more wonderprone while deepening our understanding of one another.

Wonder Compatibility

Wonder is a universal primary emotion, so identifying the nature of that emotion for the people in your social universe is a powerful tool for building more meaningful relationships. Having a shared language to identify and express our wonderbringers to one another helps us learn more about ourselves and, in turn, create community with people through a rewarding emotional conduit. This language naturally develops as we become more attuned to our elicitors of wonder.

As we covered in Chapter Five, elicitors can be categorized and subcategorized in several ways. First, they are split into two initial categories, perceptual and conceptual, and then further classified as natural, cognitive, or social. Perceptual experiences are best described as those things you might experience with your five senses, whereas conceptual elicitors are those wonder experiences triggered by ideas. Natural elicitors are incredibly common and probably one of the first types of wonder experiences you might conjure up if asked to recall a moment of awe. A cognitive elicitor could be a poem or a theorem. And social could be attending church or watching your child take their first steps. Lastly, there are flavors, and we're not talking about Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough but rather emotional tones like beauty, virtue, exceptional ability, threat, and the supernatural.

It's worth explaining again that the categorization of wonderbringers isn't always discrete. Music can be cognitive and social. Seeing the geysers at Yellowstone could be natural and

cognitive. And the categorization is in the eye of the beholder. For some, the Grand Canyon could be a perceptual, natural, threat-based wonderbringer; for others, it could be conceptual and cognitive. Share the wonderbringer with your family, and it could become all three—natural, cognitive and social.

The complex, layered, ineffable quality of wonder, however, means that even with these nifty categories, wonder will not always fit in just one box and will likely have elements of a few categories. For many people, however, there are commonalities in their individual wonderbringer, and as we develop our understanding of what activities or locales bring us wonder, we start to build a picture of what could be called our wonder archetype. Understanding these basic classifications can be helpful as it gives us a bit of a lexicon of wonder to share with others.

Author and family counselor Gary Chapman wrote a best-selling book on what he called love languages. In it, Chapman explains that there are five primary ways people like to give and receive love: receiving gifts, physical touch, quality time, words of affirmation, and acts of service. What Chapman's book does so effectively is take an emotion that is universal and primary—love—and help people define, share, and discover compatibility in the ways they express that emotion to one another. The benefit of having this language is improved communication, reduced conflict, and stronger relationships. Our wonder archetype is a similar concept, and I can envision a time when people will explore this kind of wonder language with their partners, family, colleagues, and community.

Wonder Compatibility and Conflict

When we consider compatibility, this isn't to imply that there is a single combo that is right or wrong. It's an invitation to recognize that because wonder is a primary emotion humans seek and are transformed by, appreciating what generates that for your partner, children, or friends is a way to enrich your relationship with them. It can also help explain potential conflicts. If, for instance, you feel compelled to spend as much time as possible in nature to get your wonder fix, and your partner has their head in a book looking for the same, this can create friction. But armed with the language of wonder archetypes, the conversation becomes less about "hobbies" or what you like to do in your free time and more about what is deeply meaningful to you.

I'll give you an example. I have a good friend who is a huge live music fan. Any genre of music, from Jewel to jam bands to Jon Bon Jovi. It feeds her wonder. She often says, "live music is my church." It is how she connects with her small-self, and when she is denied it, her spirit falters. She has lovingly shared this wonderbringer with her children, who have accompanied her to kid-friendly concerts (with ear protection) since they were babies. Her brother, on the other hand, associates live music with debauchery and drug use, seeing it as a pastime for a misspent youth. He was horrified that his nieces were in that sort of environment and felt his sister was far too old for what he deemed adolescent, irresponsible behavior. His revulsion was so deep that it cascaded into broader critiques of her child-rearing approach and has since snowballed into what remains an incredibly strained, flinty relationship.

It would be easy to say that the brother should live and let live (and you would be right) but what we really have here is a failure to appreciate the wonder archetype of his sister. He saw live music as frivolous, whereas for my friend, it was anything but—it was her source of wonder, a thing to be honored and supported. Would having had this language to discuss the issue helped the two of them find a resolution? Maybe not if the brother was so judgmental, but perhaps it would have added some gravitas and meaning to the conversation if he appreciated how primary that wonderbringer was for my friend's wellbeing and sense of self.

I have another friend who was in a fledgling relationship with an incredibly kind and intelligent gent. When they went on their first vacation together, though, some serious conflicts arose. On their trip to Japan, she loved engaging with locals. Any chance she got to chat with people from the area about their culture, the things they enjoyed, and how they spent their time was a meaningful part of her vacation experience. Her natural openness and curiosity led her to people, and these people and their stories were her wonderbringers. She was not a natural extrovert—there had to be motivation behind her engaging with other people—but her curiosity for learning always started with a person, and it motivated her to connect with locals. But her boyfriend preferred wandering in museums and reading guidebooks to discover meaning, finding time with the locals intrusive and distracting.

This discord didn't boil down to a simple preference issue. My friend's social connection with the people of a different culture was her wonderbringer, whereas his intellectual connection through museums and guides was his. When she tells me this story upon her return, I share the idea of wonder archetypes and compatibility with her. She went away and began using that language with her boyfriend to discuss the source of their discord, and she found the subsequent conversations illuminating. In the end, they broke up amicably, realizing that their wonderbringers, and hence the ways they pursued meaningful experiences, weren't compatible.

This sort of disconnect isn't uncommon. A typical area of conflict in marriages is how individual partners like to spend their time together and the shared activities they engage in. When people are forced to engage in activities that are not aligned with their personality, it's not just annoying, it causes stress. Understanding wonder compatibility enriches relationships by minimizing conflict and maximizing harmony.

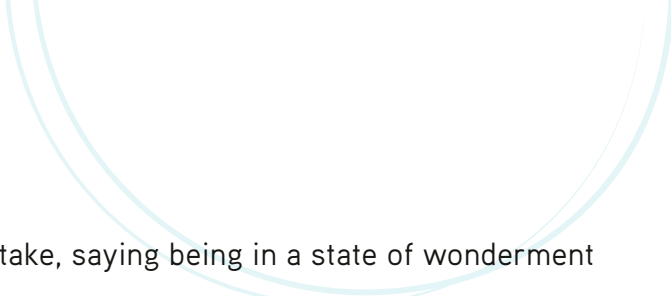
How couples spend their money is also a key point of relational conflict. Spending habits of those who are more wonderprone appear to differ from those who are less so. In a study looking at the spending habits of those with higher narcissistic tendencies, those who experienced awe regularly reported a decrease in impulse spending and an increase in pro-social spending. This study aligns with the findings of our happiness researcher Melanie Rudd who discovered that after a wonder experience, people prefer experiential learning to receiving a material benefit.

Rudd sees the potential for her wonder research to apply to how we spend time and money within relationships. "It sounds so silly, but consider vacation planning. We all want a vacation, and whatever your price range, you can step back and go, 'How would I get wonder on this vacation?'" Rudd shares that she "didn't come from a lot of money," and her family vacations were spent camping or on simple trips to the ocean. While these trips were not extravagant, her family shared the same sense of nature-based wonder, making those trips memorable, meaningful, and low conflict. "I think that it's just a mindset. But it requires the language to explore it."

Managing Relational Conflict Through Wonder

One way wonder can support managing relational conflict is through curiosity and awe. Neuroscientist Beau Lotto believes these emotions support us in conflict as they create mental movement away from entrenched ideas. “In the words of Joseph Campbell, ‘Awe is what enables us to move forward.’ Or, in the words of a dear friend, probably one of our greatest living photographers, Duane Michaels, maybe it gives us the curiosity to overcome our cowardice.”

Lotto has found openness and curiosity for learning are key contributors to successful conflict resolution. “Consider conflict, which seems to be so omnipresent in our society at the moment. If you and I are in conflict, it’s as if we’re at the opposite ends of the same line. And my aim is to prove that you’re wrong and to shift you towards me,” Lotto explains. “The problem is, you are doing exactly the same. You’re trying to prove that I’m wrong and shift me towards you. Notice that conflict is the setup to win but not learn. Your brain only learns if we move. Life is movement.” Lotto believes that wonder, and in particular awe, can act as a “ladder into uncertainty” that helps us lessen conflict and increase our epistemic humility.



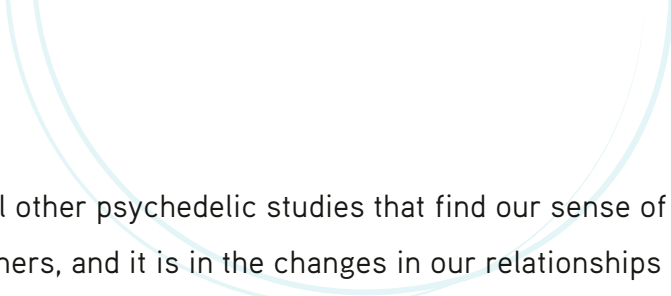
Sleep researcher Azizi Seixes has a similar take, saying being in a state of wonderment helps us increase empathy while suspending judgment. “Wonderment powers empathy. You can’t cultivate empathy from this vantage point of the calculus that we oftentimes do that says, ‘Well, I got to see your side, and you have to see my side.’ It’s really the ability to see this individual as a wonderfully, masterfully made person. Even the wretched of the earth—everyone has beauty and magic.”

This kind of thinking can be applied in so many settings. Using wonder as a tool to increase humility and empathy would help us in our marriages and families, congregations and communities. It’s helpful to understand that while wonder is universal, it is contextual, so certain cultures may experience and express it in varying ways, impacting the degree to which wonder influences pro-sociality and relationships.

Relationships and Self-transcendence

In Chapter Sixteen, we explored wonder as the root catalyst of psychedelic healing and self-transcendent transformation. Psychedelic researcher David Yaden believes much of the benefit may be derived from how wonder transforms not only our worldview but our relationships with one another. “I think that the benefit [of psychedelics] probably lies much closer to home than we realize. How do these kinds of experiences reset or reinvigorate the kinds of connections that we already have with loved ones, with friends and family?”

He believes the small-self experienced from psychedelics makes room for more compassionate interpersonal relationships. “A person undergoes a kind of self-loss and thereby feels more connected to others or to the universe as a whole. It is triggered during times of compassion but not during times of pride. Furthermore, oxytocin release may be tied to vagal tone, which has been implicated in a wide range of outcomes related to perceived social connection.” One participant in a psychedelic experiment shared their renewed sense of social connectivity this way: “Love is the primary and fundamental cosmic fact. . . . I was this fact, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that this fact occupied the place where I had been.”



Yaden's point of view is supported by several other psychedelic studies that find our sense of self exists only in relation to our sense of others, and it is in the changes in our relationships with others that we find the benefits resident within the self-transcendence of wonder.

"When you read some of the accounts of these experiences with that in mind, it really begins to stand out how much people talk about feeling grateful for their friends and their family as a result of these experiences," Yaden explains. "I think we might be glossing over that a little bit and focusing more on the really far-out subjective phenomenological fireworks associated with the experience and forgetting about the stuff that's really close to home."

He hopes his future research will focus on the ways self-transcendent experiences influence and impact our close relationships. "In some of our studies, it's not so much the self-loss, but rather the connectedness that seems to be driving the wellbeing. . . . And that's surprising, I think. A lot of researchers are maybe barking up the wrong tree in terms of ego dissolution, and this feeling of social connectedness is where the real action is."



Wonder Wrap-up








- Like other aspects of our personality, our wonderbringers are a fundamental element of who we are. Our wonderbringers, therefore, contribute to the overall compatibility we experience in our relationships.
 - By understanding and defining our wonderbringers, we develop a sense of our individual wonder archetype. Communicating this archetype with others enhances our connectivity and increases relational harmony.
 - When wonder archetypes aren't compatible, or when others trivialize our wonderbringers, this can be the cause of friction and conflict in relationships.
 - Wonder can support conflict management in relationships by increasing our empathy and epistemic humility, thus moving our thinking from entrenched positions.
 - Self-transcendent experiences appear to improve our interpersonal relationships. The shift in perspective vis-a-vis personal relationships may be an underappreciated element of psychedelic therapy.
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