

Regaining a sense of admiration and wonder

St. Louis Faculty and Staff Retreat presentation

Friday, November 2, 2007

The theme for our morning together is **admiration**.

admiration, to admire: from the Latin *ad mirare*, literally *at wonder*, “to wonder at”
Admiration implies a sense of wonder, is largely synonymous with wonder.

If so, then there is something incredibly *refreshing* about admiration.

Admiration raises us above repetition and predictability.

Admiration, therefore, keeps us youthful and interiorly free.

What is it then to admire?

Let me begin with a passage from Aristotle, from his book later called “Metaphysics”.

Aristotle? Why Aristotle? Because I can!

Around 350 AD, when things were, in a sense, simpler and more natural,

this genius paid unbelievable attention, this genius *admired*,

and he shared his observations.

ALL persons by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing (one might say) to everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things.

How does this passage help us to understand admiration?

I would like to say that

to admire is to behold the splendor of something or someone that is not me.

When you think about it, strictly speaking, we do not admire ourselves.

On a good day, we *love* ourselves.

OK, we may (or may not!) admire ourselves in the mirror.

But when we do so, we are, in a sense, actually looking at ourselves as “*other*”.

A mirror allows us to do this.

Admiration presupposes *otherness* and *transcendence*.

We admire a reality that is *other* than us, and, in its otherness, *transcends* us.

And in the “space” between knowing and unknowing, we wonder, we admire.

Or more precisely, prompted by both

- what we experience of a reality *and*
- what escapes us of a reality
we stand in awe, we admire.

We need to be both

- experientially connected to the reality *and*
- transcended by the reality
for wonder, for admiration to be aroused in us.

“Been there, done that” does not arouse wonder.
Something completely outside the realm of our experience
and thus completely unknown does not arouse wonder.

Admiration, therefore, is really so very simple.
It is all within gazing distance.
It all begins with looking, with seeing.
If it is so simple, why do we not find ourselves more often in admiration?
If it is so liberating, why do we not find ourselves more often in admiration?
Could it be because we are creatures of habit and comfort? Hmmm.
Could it be because cynicism knocks at our door? Hmmm.
Life is hard, and we all have, in different ways, backaches and headaches and heartaches.
And instinctively we shelter ourselves.
And instinctively,
presuming that the rest of the journey will likely have a whole lot more aches,
we spend a lot of time and energy

- developing strategies to assuage and distract ourselves from the pain
- accumulating reserves for a rainy day

And we consequently enter into a mode of functioning
in which we are somewhat entangled in ourselves; call it “self-absorption mode”.
We are all guilty of this. I know I am!
We evaluate everything around us by how it affects us....

This is very understandable.
But, if we remain in our safety zone, our comfort zone

- which is very often very small
- which is very often a set walls erected out of fear or despair or plain fatigue

we deprive ourselves of *wonder*-ful experiences.
When I am in my comfort zone, I feel, well, *comfortable* (or so I think...),
but there is not a whole lot of newness and thus not a whole lot of aliveness.

The aforementioned foundation in experience, the connection to reality
is key to self-awareness and to understanding the simple journey to wonder.
Admiration is truly within reach, or within *gaze*.

How do we rediscover a sense of wonder in our lives?
What do we do if we find ourselves blasé or tired or cynical, i.e. largely “over it”?
An important distinction must be made so to answer the question well.
We must consider ourselves and our lives from two viewpoints,
and we must answer the question from two viewpoints (or at two levels).
We are *human beings* (on a good day!) and we are *children of God*.
We do not have two separate identities,
but we can consider our humanness, who we are in our humanity,
and we can consider the child of God in us, ourselves in relation to God,
as children of God, as touched and transformed by God.
Gradually, of course, the child of God in us takes deeper and deeper hold

and we are increasingly “divinized”, and divine love flows through us more and more.
And so the questions are,

- “How do we *humanly* speaking regain a sense of wonder?”
- “How do we *divinely* speaking regain a sense of wonder?”

From the human viewpoint, recall the words of Aristotle.

One of the biggest favours we can do ourselves is to be deliberate and conscious
about the task of awakening ourselves to reality.

With our minds we are meant to know reality as it is: nature, people, human experiences.

With our hearts we are meant

- to love other persons
- to engage in deep, interpersonal relationships.

One of the biggest favours we can do for ourselves (and increasingly so in our world),
is to awaken ourselves to reality, to the world around us in its freshness.

We are made for this world: to see, to hear, to smell, to touch, to taste,
and in that direct contact, to admire and to come to understand.

Re-awakening ourselves entails, therefore, a primacy of *quality* over *quantity*.

Quality leads to inquiry, to questioning, for quality leads to awe

- because there is transcendence; and awe leads me to question.

One of the human implications of Jesus’ statement that we ought to be like children,
is that we ought to admire and to be *inquisitive*.

Inquisitiveness begins with wonder, with admiration.

A “know-it-all” has a closed mind

(and is thus rarely invited to the cocktail party!)

Wonder, admiration begins with quality – as simplistic and as naïve as that may sound.

For example, the blueness of the sky transcends me.

The quickness of my computer connection can be measured
and thus does not totally transcend me.

The fresh qualities of the world around us escape us. We cannot put our paws on them.

With the *quantitative* aspect of the world around us, the case is different.

We can grasp it by measuring.

In fact, in order to more fully grasp them, we must measure it.

That is why to the questions, “How fast?” or “How big?”

we can answer: “60 MPH” or “6 feet tall”.

But we cannot really answer the questions, “How blue?” or “How sweet?”.

“Well, *blue!* *sweet!*”

Our world is now so mediated (telephones, beepers, pagers, computers, navigators, etc...) that quality is increasingly veiled, and something of our minds is closing.

The sign of this is the boredom that we experience and see,
and of which our students so often complain.

It is reality, in its native, natural state that most deeply awakens the mind.

We, our and kids, are so easily bored nowadays

because we and they are less in touch with purer reality.

We are being plunged into worlds of images and ideas.

Think about it, how much admiration does the computer awaken in you?

(which is why the computer should be used sparingly in education)

– do not make me go there!)

We no longer know how to gaze upon and appreciate a sunset,
but we can surf the internet or watch television until our eyes bleed (been there!).
If all we experience is pre-digested, packaged information, and image upon image
we are longer in admiration, and thus no longer inquire, no longer question.
And so, a little recipe (which some may find almost silly):
take a few minutes each day to gaze upon something natural; let yourself get lost in it.
Experience the delight of sensation, in particular the sense of sight,
and experience being safely (worry not!) but *really* drawn out of yourself
engaged by something that transcends you.
Remember: wonder keeps you young, and there is no surgery involved!
Practice wonder, and watch boredom and fatigue and cynicism fade away.

From a divine perspective, i.e. from the perspective of our relationship with Christ,
wonder is necessarily a question of faith.
In other words, it is in faith – which enables us to engage Christ whom we do not see –
that we experience *another* wonder, *another* admiration.

We regain a sense of wonder

- in choosing to engage reality, the world around us in its freshness *and*
- in leaning upon what we know in faith, upon the *One* we know in faith
and leaning upon the hope that is ours which enables us to cling to Him.

We can (and should!) admire the natural beauty of the world around us

– which includes of course the people around us –
and we can admire the world and people around us

- in relation to God
- as touched by God
- as loved by God
- as made use of by God to touch me.

And this *divine* sense of admiration is transformative.

It is not just a safety net for me so that I not completely fall into cynicism!

It regenerates my gaze.

When Mother Teresa says that the poor, that persons with disfigured bodies and psyches
– those from whom we spontaneously turn away our gaze – are Jesus in disguise,
she is either delusional and ridiculously naïve,
or she is seeing something else than meets the eye,
and her gaze has been transformed and regenerated.

Such a perspective, such a gaze can be ours.

It is ours for the asking – quite simply.

We regain a sense of wonder by our choosing.

We can choose our focus for the day, each day.

We can choose – more than to look at the positive – to look at the *real*, at quality.

And we can make that choice with respect to people: our significant others,
our family members, our neighbors, the children we serve, our co-workers.

But, honestly, there are days when such a choice of focus just does not seem to cut it.

The weight of something indefinable makes it very difficult.

(again, it is not just a question of being positive, but of being real and qualitative.)
But there are days when life is a little too much.
Every day, but on those days in particular, we must know that there is a Presence.
There is the Presence of Someone who is not determined by what weighs upon me.
There is the Presence of Someone whose love for me
 is not determined (and thus diminished) by what I have done or not done.
There is the Presence of Someone who wishes to transform and regenerate my gaze.
We call him *the Christ*.
We are invited to a simple, liberating, deeply personal relationship with Him.
We have been given three gifts that enable us to do so: faith, hope, and love.
All we must do is express a desire for relationship, and He will do the rest.
Our primary part, our primary task is that of saying “yes”
– which can be challenging at times
because we fall back into the boredom or the fatigue or the cynicism,
basing our evaluation on how things affect us.
Such is often our spontaneous *modus operandi*; and none of us is immune.
All we need to do when this occurs is to bring it before the Christ, and lay it before him,
saying, “I have done it again. I got entangled. But you know my heart,
this heart which I open to you, even though I am scared or hurt or indifferent.”
He will do the rest.
He will carry the weight.
He will awaken the wonder...