

The Death of Wonder

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A cheetah stares down from a thicket of low branches, stalking the river below it. I watch its concentrated grace for a few seconds before it explodes into the shallows, where I lose sight as it as it thrashes with...something? A fish? A snake?

No. An alligator. A real live alligator, subdued by the great cat's clamp on the back of its neck. I watch as a reptile that triggers every base terror I have wriggles vainly, like an overexcited kitten. The cheetah drags the alligator up a bank and out of sight.

Or maybe it's dragging a crocodile. And maybe the cheetah is a leopard. I don't know, and I won't find out, because I'm already onto the next distraction in my Facebook scroll: an advertisement for yoga pants that will make me lithe and successful. That temptation is followed quickly by an old friend's rant about her child's vomit, which I inexplicably read in its entirety.

And I've already forgotten about the wonder unfolding just upscreen.

Choice of attention — to pay attention to this and ignore that — is to the inner life what choice of action is to the outer. In both cases, a man is responsible for his choice and must accept the consequences, whatever they may be.

—W.H. Auden

The internet generation is bombarded by digital stimuli at every turn, all clamoring for our attention. And they get it. One infinitesimal byte after another whizzes by our hungry gaze, and we are rapt — but only for the millisecond it's there.

The problem with this state of affairs is that attention is a monotonically decreasing function. Increasing its inputs creates less of it, and over time, almost zeroes it out entirely. As we forge ahead into a modern age more full of these inputs than any in history, we will be forced to grapple with the consequences of our inattention. We will discover what it means to see millions of things, and watch none of them.

The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of starstuff.

—Carl Sagan

Which is a shame. When you really watch the world around you it becomes a treasure trove of wonders. That leaf on the maple tree outside your office has veins that look just like your

hand's. Small Mongolian girls hunt with some of the world's most dangerous predators in primal synchronicity. You are reading these words because in some factory somewhere, an intricate machine created an even more intricate machine in which molten metal thin as smoke transmits a precise electrical monologue, endless whispered Yesses and Nos that are the white noise behind our generation. Behind our century — our aeon, in fact.

And the more capacity we have to create these wonders, the less capacity we have to wonder at them. It's the greatest irony of the modern age.

I have seen so many extraordinary things, nothing seems extraordinary anymore.
—Lewis Carroll

Then there's the question of the commonplace. The Internet brings us sights and the sounds and feelings, everything but the smells and the touch (and I believe those are coming — virtual reality will shortly be much less virtual), of places across the whole planet. This can be a profoundly good thing; see the comments on the impossibility of the Arab Spring without the worldwide support made possible through on-the-ground videos broadcast via Facebook.

But it also makes the foreign immediate, the exotic banal, and the wondrous commonplace. Who pays attention to the commonplace? Who among us, if we question ourselves fully, interrogates everyday life to unearth its gems? Very few.

It's not that the world isn't thinking about attention and the electronic age's negative effect on it. There's a national, even global conversation about this issue, one usually couched in terms of children and brain damage and school performance. But the implications of inattention are so much broader than a generation of failed history quizzes. When watching a cheetah kill an alligator twice its mighty size becomes an everyday occurrence, we cease to marvel. We are losing our capacity for wonder.

The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction.
—Rachel Carson

Why is this dangerous? Because like the attention it requires, wonder is monotonic — but increasingly so. It begets only more of itself, and of other enviable virtues: faith, for instance, or hope, or protectiveness. When we find something wonderful — literally, truly full of wonder — we usually find ourselves feeling an ever-increasing desire to protect it.

In coming years, our protective instincts will become imperative. Think of the tiny murders our multiplying population commits daily, just to survive. How much less water in our reservoirs because I brushed my teeth this morning? How many thousands of dead insects, and how much corollary damage to a broader ecosystem, because someone cut down a tree that left

space for a field in which that person grew my coffee beans? And would I care more about these little losses, these tiny Armageddons, if my water or my coffee were less easily accessible? If I were forced to pay attention, true attention, to their necessity?

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.
—Arthur C. Clarke

In the coming years, I wish us wisdom. If we can learn to grow into an awareness of the true need for paying attention to the world around us, it will blossom in front of our collective eyes into a thing as full of magic as my great cat friend and his conquest, brought to me all the way from across the globe. I will try to carry the memory of that throughout the rest of my Facebook scrolling, my Googling, my YouTubing, my NetFlixing, my endlessly inattentive day. I will try to remember the wonder.