

## Wisdom's Wonder

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I cannot offer a specific response, by way of criticism or support, to Kathy's insightful essay. I am not an educational theorist (nor the son of an educational theorist), just a lowly student and occasional teacher of the Bible. It is clear to me in light of Kathy's reflections that the standardized, fact-oriented method of testing in the classroom has little place in the church. Aristotle's moral and aesthetic values, with the inclusion of "happiness," are appropriate aims for education in general, just as faith, hope, and love are for Christian education in particular. Such aims transcend conventional forms of assessment. But what has riveted my attention is Kathy's inclusion of the Bible's wisdom literature, specifically Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, under the category of "formative assessment," a more child-centered approach. It is no coincidence that much of Proverbs is rhetorically directed to a child;<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiastes to a "young man" (Eccl 11:9). Wisdom in the biblical sense provides a critical, overarching aim to Christian education, under which such important values as truth, beauty, and goodness, along with justice, righteousness, and happiness, can be found. Wisdom is the bridge between truth and faith. Perhaps one could call wisdom's program a "character-based" approach to education. But even that doesn't fully capture the breadth and depth of wisdom's pedagogy, much less capture the transformative nature of Christian Education.

Biblical wisdom is a journey, as suggested by the frequent metaphor of the "pathway."<sup>2</sup> Wisdom's starting point is "the fear of the LORD" (1:7; cf. Ps 111:10), as if to suggest that the center of knowledge, whether of the self or of the world, lies outside self and world. The center is found in God. Far from terror or dread, the "fear" to which Proverbs refers is heightened reverence for God, the kind of reverence that is rooted in awe and wonder. Such "fear" captivates and stirs the imagination; it is a joy-filled trembling at the threshold of truth and grace. Cultivating such fearful wonder is foundational to growing in wisdom. To put it another way, the wonder of it all prompts one—anyone—to wonder about it all.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Prov 1:8; 2:1; 3:1, 21; 4:1, 10, 20; 5:1, 7; 6:1, 20; 7:1, 24; 8:32.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Prov 1:15; 2:8, 13, 20; 3:17, 23; 4:11; 8:20; 16:25; 30:19-20.

Bioanthropologist Melvin Konner regards the capacity to wonder as “the hallmark of our species and the central feature of the human spirit.”<sup>3</sup> Although our own biological classification, *Homo sapiens* (“wise human”), may be too self-congratulatory, there is no doubt that we are at the very least *Homo admirans*, the “wondering human.” And if the capacity to wonder is not developed, then wisdom itself is stifled. According to Proverbs 8:22-31, wonder is the basis for wisdom. Here, Wisdom is personified as a child and gives a wide-eyed account of God’s creative activity. According to her testimony, she is conceived in v. 22, gestated (“woven”) in v. 23, birthed in vv. 24-25, present before creation in v. 27, and “playing” in creation in vv. 30-31. Verse 30 is the interpretive crux of this poem. Most translations cast Wisdom as the “master worker” or “craftsman” in this verse. It all comes down to one single word in Hebrew: *’āmôn*, and if you left the term untranslated, the meaning would still be clear:

I was beside [God] *’āmôn*,  
I was his delight day by day,  
playing before him every moment,  
playing in his inhabited world,  
delighting in Adam’s offspring.

However one translates this word, it clearly has something to do with the image of a playing child. The context demands it, as does the Hebrew etymology of the word as it stands.<sup>4</sup> In recounting God’s creation, Wisdom also recounts herself as a child playing, delighting, learning, and growing. Wisdom, in short, is created in the *imago nati*, underscoring the primacy of play in the sapiential way of life, the way of wisdom. Wisdom revels in describing herself playing and delighting before God and in creation as she “grows up” beside God. In Wisdom, “child’s play” takes on entirely cosmic, indeed biblical, proportions. When it comes to Wisdom’s education, the play’s the thing.

Wisdom’s play is everywhere and at every time in creation. She is no passive spectator: every step of God’s creating is graced by Wisdom’s playful presence, and her play serves double

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<sup>3</sup> Melvin Konner, *The Tangled Wing: Biological Constraints on the Human Spirit* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; New York: Henry Holt, 2002), 488.

<sup>4</sup> For detailed discussion, see William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 164-67, 286 n16.

duty. Her activity engages both God and the world in the mutuality of play, holding creator and creation together through the common bond of delight. As God's partner in play, she is "beside" the creator of all as much as she is beside herself in joy. As a child, Wisdom is "delight" of the world, the delight that enlightens the world.

What kind of educational setting does Wisdom require for her play? From this ancient text it seems that Wisdom requires the world, no less, as her classroom, a world made safe and secure, and yet a world that is richly manifold and engaging: a world secured for the purpose of play. In other words, God creates a world that is both "childproof" and child-friendly, safe and enriching. Wisdom recounts God at work in carving, anchoring, stabilizing, establishing, circumscribing, securing, and setting boundaries. The mountains serve as weight-bearing pillars that hold up the heavens to prevent cosmic collapse. As divine architect, God sets the cosmic infrastructures and boundaries firmly in place, all to maintain the world's stability. The universe is a cosmic construction zone. It is a world carefully designed for habitation. But God is not just the creator of the cosmos; the deity of design is also a doting (not to mention single) parent. As far as Wisdom is concerned, God is both parent and architect, and the world is her playhouse.

In Wisdom's world, there is no chaos lurking around the corner, or under the bed. In Wisdom's world, creation does not hang by a thread. It is a world in which terror is banished and joy and wonder reign. As a child grows in wisdom by engaging her environment with wide-eyed abandon, so Wisdom actively engages creation in her wanton delight. From the text it is easy to imagine Wisdom's joy stemming from her discovery of creation's wondrous complexities, from quarks to quasars, but what seems to rivet her attention the most are creation's marvelous inhabitants: the offspring of Adam. Wisdom's world is more relational than referential.

E. O. Wilson, perhaps the greatest living biologist today, has pointed out that a much better educational policy than "No Child Left Behind" is "No Child Left Inside." Children in the U.S. spend an inordinate amount of their time indoors and have yet to discover what lies even beyond their back door. Into the woods, into the wild, to discover the blooming, buzzing world that lies beyond flat panel TVs and computer screens. Many children today suffer from NDD: nature deficit disorder. Most of us do, child and adult alike. But Wisdom is no child left inside. She does not suffer from creation deficit disorder. To the contrary, God lets her go play, and her play embraces all creation.

Perhaps we can learn something from child Wisdom. Taking her cue from another wisdom book, the book of Job, Carol Newsom laments that

there are not many ethics courses in our seminaries and universities that spend the first three days in silence—one day in the forest, one day at the shore of the sea, one night in a field gazing at the stars.<sup>5</sup>

To live in Wisdom's world is to sit awestruck outside, to experience the joy of discovering creation anew, to enjoy the delight of discernment and the thrill of edifying play. It is to know the world as God's good and groaning creation. To live in Wisdom's world, the biblical sages say elsewhere, is to walk the path she forges, the path of "righteousness, justice, and equity" (1:3), a path that "is like the light of dawn, shining brighter and brighter until full day" for all who desire wisdom (4:18). And on that path, to quote a prophet, "a little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11:6). Wisdom's path is the playful journey of discernment in which what is discovered and what is revealed become nearly one and the same.

Admittedly, the "full day" that ushers in all knowledge and insight never arrives within any given lifetime. God's world, indeed God's very self, will always be more than what we know or grasp. The aged, according to Proverbs, still have much to learn (1:5). As Wisdom's growth begins in joy, may the wide-eyed delight of children never be lost on the wise. For in Wisdom's eyes there really are no grownups. And in Jesus' eyes we enter God's kingdom as children (Matthew 18:3-4).

How does one measure wonder? I don't know. But what I do know is that the wonder-filled quest for wisdom never ends. May progress on the path always be marked with dance steps.

#### Questions:

1. How do you understand the relationship between education and wisdom?
2. How prominent is play in your life? How prominent is it—and should it be—in education, whether in school or at church?

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<sup>5</sup> Carol A. Newsom, "The Moral Sense of Nature: Ethics in the Light of God's Speech to Job," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 15/1 New Series (1994): 17.

3. What role should time spent in nature play in education?