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Special Section: I&C Preview

The Practice of Wonder Toward Psychological Well-Being

He who can no longer pause to wonder and stand wrapt in awe is as good as dead; his eyes are closed.

—Albert Einstein

WONDER STIRRED THE IMAGINATION OF GREAT NOVELISTS, PHILOSOPHERS AND THEOLOGAINS FOR MILLENNIA. It's a tiny spark in the eyes of a child while also the energy propelling us to explore outer space. Like joy and sorrow, wonder is an intrinsic part of human nature. Yet, the field of psychology has focused very little on wonder, or reflected on its function in our lives. Where does wonder come from? What is its value? Could it have a role in psychological well-being? In this paper we address these questions through the lens of Imago Relationship Theory and Therapy.

The Evolution of Imago

Imago theory was catalyzed by Harville in 1979 and — using our relationship as a living laboratory — evolved into a full-bodied therapeutic system throughout the 1980s. Prior to Imago, couples therapy focused on shoring up two self-contained individuals disillusioned with their relationship. Marriage was to be a place for personal need gratification. And the marriage therapist's job was to “fix the couple's problems” by diagnosing, confronting and advising the two individuals to negotiate more successfully. However, this usually failed to give

the couple long-term resolution.

In contrast, Imago therapy moved away from “therapist as the answer,” toward “therapist as coach,” guiding the couple to realize that they were each other’s answer. By teaching the couple to communicate in a constructive way and respond to each other’s needs, we encouraged a shift away from individual healing toward relational healing. According to Imago, we are born in relationship, wounded in relationship, and can heal only in relationship. This shifts the locus of healing to the couple, locating it in the “space between” them. Thus the Imago process invites couples into a “conscious partnership,” recognizing that they have the opportunity to co-create a marriage where the pain and hurts from childhood can be healed.

The core intervention of Imago therapy is the Imago Dialogue, a structured three-step process in which couples learn to take turns talking and listening. The talker becomes the “Sender”; the listener, the “Receiver.” Receivers learn to: 1) mirror (echoing with accuracy what they heard); 2) validate (stating that what they heard makes sense); and 3) empathize (imagining the feelings behind the words expressed). This structure shifts couples out of conflict into a collaborative process in which they experience connecting.

Imago Dialogue helps couples in three important ways. First, by taking turns talking, individuals give each other space to express different points of view, without interruption or deflection. They allow, for the moment, two different points of view to coexist. This structure alone helps them achieve differentiation (affirming that both make sense in their separate worlds, even if they don’t agree) and connection. Second, the differentiated state that emerges within the structure helps couples become aware of the “space between” them, inviting them to care for this relational space as partners. They learn to keep this space between safe, free from anxiety and negativity, a prerequisite for connection. Third, Imago Dialogue helps couples lessen their reactivity to each other, to instead empathize for one another. This too helps create safety in the space between.

Within the Imago Dialogue process there is an important moment. After Receivers mirror, they ask, “Is there more?” “I hear you are feeling anxious about tomorrow’s meeting. Is there more?” “I hear you are frustrated I did not call. Is there more?” This question invites Senders to go deeper into their content and feelings.

While we thought this phrase would be helpful in deepening understanding and empathy between couples, an unexpected and unintended consequence of this three-word phrase occurred. As Senders were invited to “share more,” they became surprisingly moved by their partners’ availability to stay present even longer to their experiencing. They also began to gain access to and language for undiscovered thoughts and feelings. Simultaneously, Receivers began to report feeling deeply moved as they learned new things about their partners, seeing them in a whole new light. “Is there more?” soon became known as “the magic phrase” in the Imago community. By inviting the experience of curiosity and wondering about the other, this phrase often helped establish even more safety, and catalyze a more wondrous connection. It is this phrase that has led us slowly into a deeper inquiry about the phenomenon of wondering and wonder in Imago theory and therapy.

Emergence of the Concept of Wonder

The concept of “wundor” arose in Old English as a noun meaning “marvelous thing, miracle, object of astonishment.” It refers to the experience of being in a state of awe, evoking feelings of rapture and reverence. It is a relational term, in that the experience does not happen without something other than oneself. It wasn’t until Middle English, around the late 13th century, that wonder as a verb arose: being curious or wondering, thus moving into the spirit of inquiry. “I wonder if it’s raining outside?” “I wonder if they like me?” One admits to a state of ambiguity and uncertainty.

When we talk about wonder in Imago therapy, we reverse the order above, and suggest that the practice of wondering (the verb) can ultimately lead to the felt sense of wonder (the noun). As Imago therapy instructs the couple to gather information about each other through questions, the couple begins to experience each other as separate yet wondrous. Wonder evokes the experience of relatedness by inviting discovery of the other.

When couples grow in their ability to wonder about each other, they relinquish the hope of being the authority on their partner’s strengths and weaknesses. Predication and certainty imprison an experience by giving it definition, dulling its luminosity. Wonder, by contrast, transcends the state of knowing and invites one into the state of not knowing, where the sense of wonder that we all had as children can be reborn, uncovering the luminosity of being.

In Imago, our key thesis is that connecting is being; we are born connecting and are meant to experience connection throughout our lives. Yet for many, even in marriage, the experience of connecting is ruptured and partners find themselves feeling isolated and alone. Yet when looking at each other through the eyes of wonder, each becomes more present for the other’s experience. The practice of presence leads to attunement, which can help couples restore the experience of connection, ultimately recovering their ontological status of *connecting as being*. It is this experience of safety and connecting that all of us yearn for each passing year throughout our human journey.

Wonder and the Brain

Our interest in wonder originated when discovering Dan Siegel’s (2007) interpersonal neurobiological concepts, positing that “tolerating ambiguity” is a sign of mental health. Whereas the human brain relishes certainty and knowing, a tolerance for ambiguity means maintaining uncertainty, despite the discomfort of not knowing. It allows us to experience difference and otherness, without the impulse to annihilate.

Siegel suggested that two brain functions seem to be involved in the process. The first is hemispherical—the right brain tolerates ambiguity better than the left. The right brain tends toward cognitive novelty, whereas the left tends toward concrete cognitive routine. According to Siegel, there is also increased activity in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC) and the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), areas associated with abstract thought and self-regulation that help us accept ambiguity and novelty.

“Openness and tolerance of ambiguity,” states Siegel, “spark our appreciation for the difference of the other... We need to not only tolerate ambiguity, but learn to treasure its secrets” (2007, p. 328). In his *Pocket Guide to Interpersonal Neurobiology* (2012), Siegel also points out that response flexibility is an important middle prefrontal function which:

...enables us to pause before responding as we put a temporal and *mental space* between stimulus and response.... From a neurobiological perspective, this *space of the mind* enables the range of possibilities to be considered, to just “be” with an experience; to be reflected upon, before engaging the “do” circuitry of action (chap. 33, p.2).

This captivated our interest, especially mine (Helen), and I began to associate the phrase, “Is there more?”—considered so “magical” in our Imago Dialogue structure—with experiencing ambiguity. I imagined that phrase, in moving Receivers to this area of the brain, might help release them from the fight/flight/freeze circuitry of the lower brain, lifting them into higher neural circuitry. And this would result in the release of neurochemicals, promoting a greater sense of well-being. According to Dr. Emrah Düzel, from the UCL Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience, the midbrain region regulates our levels of motivation by releasing dopamine in the frontal and temporal regions of the brain (University College London, 2006). Scientists have only identified a small fraction of the hundreds of neurochemicals produced by the human body. Responsible for reward-driven behavior, dopamine is one of the molecules that contribute to our sense of well-being (Berland, 2012).

Two important discoveries in the field of neuroscience over the last 20 years offer a context for the work above. The first is neuroplasticity. Clinical research has confirmed the brain’s capacity to be shaped by new experience. Actual tissue growth can be stimulated in as little as two hours (Sagi et al., 2012), and the capacity for change exists into old age. Thus, while stress can quite literally narrow the scope of attention and perception, positive emotions and practices can actually reverse the poor health consequences of too many negative emotions and experiences (Garland & Howard, 2010; Fredrickson, 1998).

Second is the concept that the brain is “experience dependent.” It is shaped by interactions with others and works constantly to relate the individual to others (Schor, 2001). Broadly speaking, people are wired for connection. Thus, feeling disconnected has a negative impact on their physical and emotional health. Practicing neural integration by focusing more on positive concepts and problem solving, and asking certain questions from time to time, can result in growing both the relationship and the brain in a healthier way (Garland & Howard, 2010; Fredrickson, 1998).

Both of these concepts can be helpful as couples learn to care better for their relationships. A century ago, psychology fatalistically believed that “biology was destiny.” Today we see that neuroplasticity implies a greater range of ways people can change when they are struggling in their relationships. Neurobiological research has established that people have the potential to “rewire” their brains with new experience and in relationship with others. And the fact that relationship experiences help shape our brains gives extra incentive to create positive feelings, such as those that arise from the experience of wonder, and to avoid those that generate unnecessary stress.

Our Personal Introduction to Wonder

Both of us had been divorced when we met. We knew firsthand how painful divorce is, especially for the children. Thus I (Helen), was determined to do all I could to succeed at marriage this second time. I longed to co-create with Harville a connected family and to help make Harville as happy as I could. So I devoted great attention to him. I tried to

anticipate his needs and offer suggestions, even before he asked for it! I would imagine saying to people proudly, “If you want to know how Harville feels or what he thinks, ask me. I care about and know him that well.” While this came from an earnest place of wanting to love him well, I began to realize over time something was seriously wrong.

As a response to my “knowing” Harville so well, to my surprise, he seemed more irritable in our relationship. I then became frustrated because he didn’t seem to appreciate all my fine efforts. Our marriage became more and more miserable. But one day, it occurred to me to ask Harville how he was feeling overall, about his work, his life, and his goals. He paused, started reflecting with me, and he ended up talking—with me just listening—for hours. Then he said: “Helen, just sharing with you like this means so much. I don’t want all your gifts and efforts. I just want you to be present for my experience of things.”

My being present to his experience, wondering and asking, “Is there more?” allowed Harville to feel far safer in our relationship. Harville wanted me to be curious, to wonder about how he was feeling, on the deepest level. He deserved that! This began a whole new transformation in our relationship. And it was wonder that initiated the pathway to the truly joyful relationship we have today.

Soon after, Harville created a way for couples to intentionally practice the “not knowing” and celebrate each other. Today we call it the Ladder to Wonder. Couples are guided to turn to each other and alternate saying statements like, “I acknowledge your otherness.” “I admire your otherness.” “I advocate your otherness.” “I adore your otherness.” Each entry is a place to reflect, and receive, and rethink who our partner really is. We started practicing this ourselves before going to bed, reading each statement one by one, pausing after each and letting the meaning wash over us. To our surprise, the feelings of excitement and awe began to flow. It is commonly known that “energy follows attention,” and this is a perfect example.

We now see this ladder as the opportunity for couples to cultivate wonder. Even if couples start in a rather perfunctory way, before long, they may find their relationship much more safe, respectful and joyful. Being intentional about the cultivation of wonder in one’s relationship has now been added to Imago theory and therapy to help couples discover thoughts and emotions they didn’t even know they had.

The Practice of Wonder

In addition to the practice of the Ladder to Wonder, there are other Imago tools that can foster curiosity and wonder in a marriage. Several exchanges in the Imago Dialogue

The Ladder to Wonder

I Acknowledge
your otherness.

I Accept
your otherness.

I Appreciate
your otherness.

I Admire
your otherness.

I Advocate
your otherness.

I Adore
your otherness.

process are questions. To start the process, Senders inquire about the partner's availability: "I have a frustration. Are you available to have an Imago Dialogue right now?" Asking for an appointment moves the person out of the assumption that the partner is ever-present, ready to focus and listen. The second question occurs during the mirroring process. Once Receivers mirror, they ask, "Did I get it?" And these two queries are followed by a third: "Is there more?" This question, so deceptively simple, is, as we have said, the linchpin of change.

There are additional practices within Imago therapy that assist couples in cultivating wonder. The Caring Behaviors Dialogue invites partners to ask the other, "What specific behaviors feel loving and caring to you?" They may be gestures that happened when they were dating or they could be a hidden desire. Asking allows the other to share what touches the heart, helping to re-ignite the romance. We also invite couples to write, share, and co-create a Relationship Vision. Wondering allows them to discover each other in new ways, motivating them to take more concrete steps in building the relationship of their dreams.

Not long ago, we had a challenging issue that repeatedly showed up in our relationship: deciding where to spend our vacation. It's an area where we are polar opposites. Whereas I (Harville), love to travel, Helen is a homebody, and likes to spend our vacations at home. So our vacation planning time was full of conflict. Luckily we see conflict as growth trying to happen. And we decided to engage respectfully using several Imago Dialogues, taking time to ask, "Is there more?" regarding what we both wanted: we became curious, rather than judgmental, about the other. And in time, an elegant solution surfaced. We rented a motorhome! This would allow me the open road, while surrounding Helen with the comforts any homebody would cherish. We couldn't have come up with this solution had it not been for wonder.

Conclusion

When the landscape around us becomes too familiar, we can lose our capacity to be impressed, astonished, in awe. And yet curiosity about, wondering about, the otherness of others is fundamental to co-existing with the rest of the human species. Victor Frankl wrote:

[T]he true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche ...being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself.... The more one forgets himself — by giving himself to... another person to love — the more human he is... (2006, p. 110).

This humanness ultimately connects us to the greater experience of life. And it is this inexplicable phenomenon of wonder that can be seen as a humble micro experience between self and other, but can also resonate with the macro state of the whole cosmos pulsating and interconnecting ad infinitum.

To date, our explorations have unearthed a neurological sequence that, if acknowledged, taught and practiced, can help couples ride a wave of wonder from conflict to connecting. We have witnessed time and again — and experienced in our own relationship — the transforming power of wonder. We know our brains are malleable and are social organs, seeking connection with others which ultimately shapes our knowledge of world and self. A key tool in building brain health, the practice of wonder can en-

gender greater compassion for others, a sense of more expansive time, and the recognition that there are greater forces at work within the universe. Thus, given the lack of research on the phenomenon of wonder, would it not be in our collective best interest to begin to give it more focus? We would fully explore the practice of wondering as a verb (moving into the spirit of inquiry) and the experience of wonder as a noun (being in a state of awe), to understand how they impact our brains and relationships, and to integrate them into a cohesive system for helping couples to restore and maintain connection. The word *psychology* suggests *logos*, "the word about" the psyche or soul. Surely wonder — which ignites our souls to learn evermore about ourselves, others and the world around us — deserves to take its place as an important practice for psychological health. ▼

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