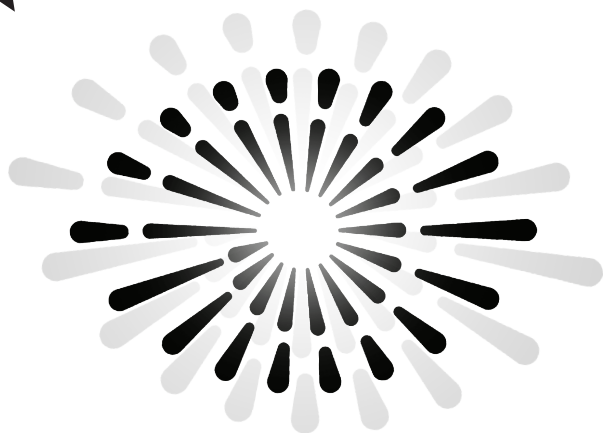


TRACKING  
WONDER



Reclaiming a Life of Meaning  
and Possibility in a World  
Obsessed with Productivity

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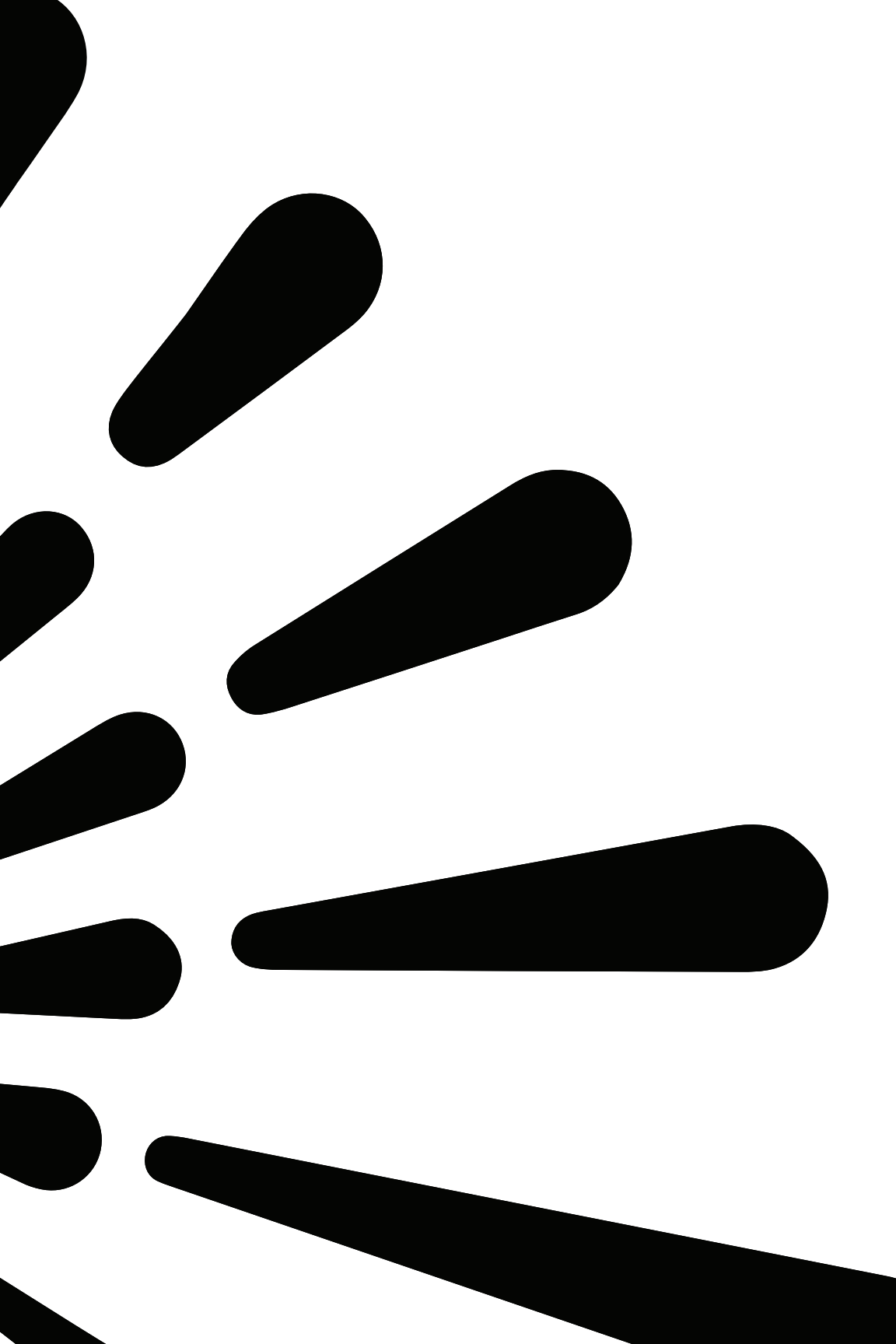
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# INTRODUCTION





## THE DAWN OF POSSIBILITY

TO EXPERIENCE WONDER IS our birthright—especially in times of challenge and change. In a fleeting moment with rippling effects, wonder can transfix us with the elegant design of a coat hook or the massive wafer of a harvest moon. It can help us delight in a mathematical insight or the surprising eloquence of a six-year-old child. For wonder is the one human experience that dissolves our biases so we can see the beauty of ourselves, one another, and our world more clearly. Wonder cracks us open to the beauty of this one life amid rampant uncertainty. But how does it do so—and what gets in our way with wonder?

Mornings can brim with possibility, afterall. Sunlight breaks the dark sky, your eyes open onto the ceiling, and you might wonder, “What could I experience today?” Maybe you imagine the ways your hours could unfold so that by night you felt you’d had a meaningful adventure. Yet, maybe your mind simply starts fretting about that unanswered email from your colleague or your child’s lost retainer that exhausted your budget.

I begin the first hours of almost every morning with both minds. One is a summer camper who relishes the idea of mornings because I equate them with open opportunity to make the most of the day. I’ve been known to ask my family to join me in impromptu dance parties at breakfast, sometimes to their grumbling annoyance. As a result, even on a gray winter’s morn, the inner light of our family amps up a few watts. Yet I also have a nervous Piglet mind. Even before I get out of bed, tiny worries can hijack huge amounts of mental megabytes that threaten to fritter away my energy. To waste time with constant worry seems like a petty crime to me. I’d rather expire at the end of a day with my pockets stuffed with wonder.

Wonder? Yes, even as a bespectacled, silver-haired man weighted down with responsibilities, I say *wonder*. Let me say this to you from the outset: Wonder is not simply for kids. Wonder is also radical grown-up stuff. It’s for you, too.

**“ Wonder is not simply  
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radical grown-up stuff. ”**

This book begins with this simple premise: when we look at visionaries, artists, scientists, and inspirational figures, we see that some of them have indeed practiced the proverbial ten thousand hours or demonstrated remarkable grit and focus in order to manifest their great work and fulfilled lives. But even more of them have a surprising advantage: they’ve kept alive an abiding sense of wonder. We now have increasing scientific evidence that experiences of wonder play a big role in sparking innovation, motivating us, and allowing us to derive meaning from what we create and experience.

The good news is that we all have access to this capacity to wonder. We always have. We just forget. Tracking wonder is the approach I have developed and tested so you can learn again how to reclaim a life of meaning and possibility without burning out. For as you will discover and as this book argues, wonder offers a beautiful counterbeat to our culture’s obsessive drumbeat of productivity.

Imagine wonder as a multifaceted prism through which you can see and experience your days anew. In this book, we explore six such facets of wonder. Track wonder through each of its facets and you can live more creatively, deepen your relationships, and navigate surprising challenges with more flexibility.

The science, stories, and invitations I share here allow you to sharpen your understanding of wonder’s dimensions and, if you choose, to apply them toward advancing an endeavor (personal, business, or otherwise) *creatively*.

Tracking wonder, then, is in part another form of paying attention. Maybe you’ve tried to “app your way to happiness” by downloading a dozen apps to help you meditate, measure your steps, and calculate your calories, all before 10:00 a.m. For some

people, these methods are tremendously helpful. But many people are unsettled by messages of “Crush it!” “Hack your productivity!” and the incessant command to “Get things done!” If that sounds familiar, yet you’re still looking to boost your creativity and find more fulfillment, you might benefit from experiencing wonder’s facets.

Or perhaps you have a steady meditation or mindfulness practice but find that it doesn’t give you the clarity and agency you’re craving. A dose of wonder could be the missing ingredient of your practice that helps you foster a wholly new relationship with your mind. Tracking wonder every day in fact could help you measure the real value and beauty in your life.

## **THE HEART OF LIVING CREATIVELY**

If you ever doubt your own creative potential, you’re not alone. Over two-thirds of Americans believe creativity is valuable to our world, and a solid 75 percent value their own creativity in addressing personal and professional challenges, yet only one in four believes they are living up to their own creative potential.

Part of the problem is we sometimes get creativity all wrong. We don’t view ourselves as creative or as leading fulfilling creative lives because we misunderstand what creativity is. When we talk about “creative” here, I mean creative in the sense of *how* you handle the inevitable uncertainties, doubts, and challenges in your life. *Creative* is not something reserved only for artists. *Creative* refers to how you can bring your ideas to fruition. What if the surprising advantage to living a life rich with creative possibility, meaning, and mastery is something we *all* have access to? What if each of us could shape such a life, no matter our circumstances?

In this age, your ability to fulfill your creative potential has less to do with developing a single-track talent in a specific domain and more to do with how you finesse challenges in pursuit of your aims. And as we’ll see, it turns out that tracking experiences of wonder is the ideal skill set to do so.



## RIPPLES OF WONDER

Imagine an experience of wonder like a pebble dropped into the pond of your perception. These moments, often quiet and fleeting, make ripples that expand and linger. Attend to enough of these rippling moments over time and your overall outlook just might shift for the better. What are some of those rippling effects?

Wonder is what can nudge your most meaningful ideas toward fulfillment even amid inevitable challenges: a computer crash, the toddler tantrum, or your own mental fatigue. Wonder, as we will see, also can provide the perspective to push through difficult experiences of grief, illness, or failure. For unlike almost any other emotional experience, wonder can keep us buoyant amid waves of uncertainty, sorrow, and fear without sinking into complete despair.

That's because wonder momentarily dissolves our habitual ways of seeing, relating, and thinking so we can glimpse again what is real and true, beautiful and possible. Consider what the English poet William Blake said about our perception: "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern." We each are wired to see things through narrow caverns for survival, but we human beings also have this extraordinary ability to trip our wiring with wonder and cleanse our perception.

Wonder also is a healing force. It snaps us out of cynicism and disbelief. It interrupts patterns of negativity, rumination, and monotony; rescues us from maelstroms or downward spirals; and offers us glimpses of another reality, right where we are. In addition, wonder turns us away from self-absorption and attunes us to others. People who experience wonder with each other develop strong bonds. Martha Nussbaum, a renowned theorist of ethics at the University of Chicago, says wonder is responsible for giving rise to other emotions—compassion, empathy, and love—that draw us out of ourselves and toward others. Experiencing more wonder can open us up to the folks

we deem “different” from us. Wonder can favorably tip our emotional and psychological scales in areas such as generosity, optimism, and making a difference in other people’s lives.

In part because of wonder’s unique and subtle effects, René Descartes called wonder “the first of all the passions,” while Socrates said that “philosophy [or the study of wisdom] begins in wonder.” Wonder is with us from our first morning in this world and stays with us until the last. This book invites you to open up to it again for the dawns in between.

Tracking wonder and its six facets offer three avenues to help you fulfill your dreams:

**LIVE MORE CREATIVELY.** Through tracking wonder you can frame every day as a creative quest directed by your curiosity and insight. You can trace your unique force of character that has been with you since your best childhood days and that guides you toward your most fulfilling activities.

**BUILD YOUR RESILIENCE.** Tracking wonder shows you how to “fertilize confusion” when you’re bewildered and how to find hope amid adversity—all as opportunities for creative, personal, and spiritual growth.

**DEEPEN YOUR RELATIONSHIPS.** Tracking wonder shows you how to dissolve your unconscious judgments, open up your mind so you can develop deeper connections, and practice the art of admiration.

And let’s remember this: As anyone who has ever gazed up at the stars on a clear night knows, wonder is ultimately inexplicable, connecting us to the divine mysteries of the universe. It reminds us humbly that the more knowledge we gain, the more we discover we do not know.

## **WHERE I COME FROM AND WHERE YOU MIGHT COME FROM**

To guide your tracking wonder journey as clearly as possible, I write from my singular perspective. I'm a cis male of European ethnic heritage residing in the Hudson Valley of New York. I'm neither wealthy nor poor, and don't experience disadvantage or discrimination regularly, if at all. I am well supported by my family, and I have been able to overcome hardships in part because of their help and love, as well as because of the tracking wonder practices I will share with you. I grew up in the 1970s, came of age in the 1980s, and have been a husband and father for over a decade. Sometimes I am able to step out of the bounds of my perspective and articulate a universal truth, and other times I am limited by who I am and can only speak to what I know. I no doubt maintain undiscovered biases and privileges, and I may not even know when these instances are, though I am committed to dismantling them whenever they crop up. I have made every attempt to consider feedback from people of different backgrounds and identities as I developed my teachings for tracking wonder, but I know that I can never speak for everyone. I write with humility, and I invite you to read with an unbiased openness so that wonder can work its magic through these words.

In interviews and conversations, people sometimes ask, "Shouldn't we just leave wonder alone?" and "Can you really teach something as spontaneous as wonder? Isn't that something that just comes with surprise or inspiration?" These questions might stem from a belief that something as truly exquisite and beautiful as the experience of wonder should not be reduced to pragmatism. I get that. I don't want to pin down wonder in my butterfly collection as a specimen of the human experience. If anything, over the past ten-plus years, I have aspired to unravel my assumptions about wonder and have explored well beyond my subjective experience, but at some point, one must be willing to make the case for what one believes so that many people can benefit.

My studies of Western wisdom traditions, philosophical hermeneutics, Eastern wisdom traditions, Native American stories, mythology and storytelling, creativity, entrepreneurship, and especially psychology and neuroscience have influenced my study of wonder, as has my direct and immediate experience in the world. My intellectual and empirical journey has guided me toward certain truths. One is this: wonder is a portal of consciousness that lets us see again what is beautiful and real, true and possible.

Every single one of us has this truly extraordinary capacity for wonder. Why *not* foster it in ways that help us individually and collectively contribute to the world in a positive way?

My work has led me especially to test these ideas among everyday geniuses of creativity. They are the people who teach me what is possible. They are the entrepreneurs and executives, teachers and makers, parents and caretakers who have “out there” ideas *and* find ways to bring those ideas from fantasy to fruition. Sometimes they do so at great odds, without the ready resources of the rich and famous. Maybe they have young children or aging parents or a middle-aged brain or a full-time job. Inevitably, unbidden surprises and obstacles could ambush their best-laid plans. What fascinates me about them is less their outward successes and more how they fashion lives of meaning and mastery along the way. More than any scholar, scientist, or obscure text, my clients, students, participants, audiences, and community members have taught me the most about wonder and its very real applications. These people are my heroes. This book puts their stories next to some of the more renowned geniuses of the world. This book is for them as it is for you.

In my consultancy and community, I hear people hungering for something beyond what they can attain with money. They don’t just want to get a promotion, move into a bigger house, or take more expensive vacations. They don’t want to hack time just so they can work more. This book is written specifically for people who want to feel alive in pursuit of ideas and activities that mean something to them at their core. They might desire to work through problems—big and small,

personal and public—in novel and useful ways. It's also written for those people who want to contribute to something that makes other people's lives richer or better. Along the way, they want to navigate—not escape—disappointments and persistent challenges with more wit, flexibility, and fortitude. And they want to experience life's mysteries with wide-eyed openness and appreciation. Wonder, it turns out, is at the heart of these desires. If this describes you, read on.

When we bring wonder to the forefront of our daily, business, and creative endeavors, it makes our fullest expression of creativity possible. It also enables fruitful connections. It is time for our culture to evolve beyond an ideal of productivity that foregrounds control, efficiency, and discipline while ignoring what truly motivates us. Making this transformation requires that we develop a new set of skills and modes of perception, grounded in the infinite possibility of the present moment. This is Tracking Wonder.