

Scholar and Pulitzer Prize winning author, Marilynne Robinson, tells the story of giving a lecture to a group of British scholars. Upon finishing a rich and insightful lecture, the room was silent. Finally, a young man stood up and spoke. “You Americans have such an advantage because of your beautiful dialect.” Of course, the irony is that Americans often think that our dialect is rather pedestrian, and it is the Brits who possess the most positively mellifluous accent in the world. Robinson uses this anecdote with her students to get them to think about their advantage, the gifts that they possess, and their ability to create beautiful sounding phrases.

She used the example during a podcast with Ezra Klein ([Hear It Here](#)). It was the entree into a discussion of the wonder of the university system in the United States. Robinson gushes in her enthusiasm about the amazing opportunities that people have to study. There aren’t just a few select institutions of higher learning. There are hundreds of them. So many wonderful institutions, both big and small. So many committed people. Excellent faculty. Amazing libraries. Beautiful concert halls. Such that, as Robinson notes, “People from around the world clamor to get into the University of Nebraska!”

What struck me about this exchange was the sheer wonder and gratitude driving Robinson’s viewpoint. It was a moment to reflect and to be drawn into her appreciation of the world. The moment was also a profound reminder of one of the important tools that we have at any point in life--but perhaps more so in a pandemic--which is to surround ourselves with beauty and wonder. Maybe it is art. Maybe it is music. Maybe it is literature. Or maybe it is a podcast with an author who truly finds amazement in the university system of the United States. Regardless of where you find it or get it, we need to place ourselves closer to those things that will feed that part of our soul and awaken such awareness within us. Otherwise, we are burdened and bogged down by things that depress or discourage or dismay. A part of our survival kit is consciously taking time to orient our gaze or our thoughts or our presence to that which reminds us of beauty and wonder and awe.

Which is really the work of Robinson: beauty, wonder, and awe. A devout Christian, she is, perhaps, one of the great apologists for the faith, especially in academic circles where faith gets less and less of a hearing. She is an apologist, not a proselytizer. The complexity of our individual selves is a part of the project that her faith informs. Such a perspective hearkens back to the comment of the British scholar after her lecture, and Robinson’s reminding students that they have that advantage, that gift, that skill, that uniqueness. The role of education and religion is about exploring who it is that we are and who it is that we are to become. And the whole journey is one that is steeped in mystery. We don’t know ourselves. We discover a little bit more each day. Yet, there is such a compassionate side to Robinson’s recognition of this fact. Be gentle with yourself as you continue to discover yourself.

Thus, where the conversation moved in the podcast was a bit troubling. Robinson goes on to critique the educational system that she just praised. Or rather she critiques the current environment that makes the system less about discovering and more about a final product that can ensure a good-paying job. Her summation begins, “I miss civilization and I want it back.” Among the paradoxes that are teased out of this part of the discussion is the strange situation we find ourselves in of being the richest country in the world, and, yet, we are impoverished in our larger communal life, how we treat one another, care for one another, and recognize that we are not means-to-an-end as human beings, rather we are the ends in themselves. Honoring that truth is vital for each of us and the collective.

Of course, there were more questions after the podcast than at the beginning. What was so pleasing, however, was the life of faith and the mind finding expression in such an articulate voice. A voice reminding us of mystery, complexity, serendipity, beauty, grace, mercy, and the hope that emerges from proximity to such things. I can only hope that a prayer service or a worship service elicits even a little of such characteristics and attributes. Food, as they say, for the soul.