**My earliest conception** of the meaning of the word wonder was a feeling that would come over me as a little kid, when I'd picture the shepherds on the night hills above Bethlehem. Even when those shepherds were made of illuminated plastic, standing around in Christmas dioramas on my neighbors' lawns, their slack-jawed expressions of wonder appealed to me. Years later, having become literate enough to read, I learned that those shepherds were also "sore afraid." But—a personal prejudice—I didn't believe in their afraidness. I believed the star in the east smote them with wonder, and that once wonder smites you, you're smitten by wonder alone. Fear can't penetrate till wonder subsides.

Wonder is my second favorite condition to be in, after love, and I sometimes wonder whether there's a difference; maybe love is just wonder aimed at a beloved.

Wonder is like grace, in that it's not a condition we grasp; it grasps us. Wonder is not an obligatory element in the search for truth. We can seek truth without wonder's assistance. But seek is all we'll do; there will be no finding. Unless wonder descends, unlocks us, turns us as slack-jawed as plastic shepherds, truth is unable to enter. Wonder may be the aura of truth, the halo of it. Or something even closer. Wonder may be the caress of truth, touching our very skin.

Philosophically speaking, wonder is crucial to the discovery of knowledge, yet has everything to do with ignorance. By this I mean that only an admission of our ignorance can open us to fresh knowings. Wonder is the experience of that admission: wonder is unknowing, experienced as pleasure.

Punctuationally speaking, wonder is a period at the end of a statement we've long taken for granted, suddenly looking up and seeing the sinuous curve of a tall black hat on its head, and realizing it was a question mark all along.

As a facial expression, wonder is the letter O our eyes and mouths make when the state itself descends. O: God's middle initial. O: because wonder opens us.

Wonder is anything taken for granted—the old neighborhood, old job, old life, old spouse—suddenly filling with mystery. Wonder is anything closed, suddenly opening: anything at all opening—which, alas, includes Pandora's box, and brings me to the dark side of the thing. Grateful as I am for this condition, wonder has—like everything on Earth—a dark side. Heartbreak, grief, and suffering rend openings in us through which the dark kind of wonder pours. I have so far found it impossible to feel spontaneously grateful for these violent openings.

But when, after struggle, I've been able to turn a corner and at least accept the opening, the dark form of wonder has invariably helped me endure the heartbreak, the suffering, the grief.

Wonder is not curiosity. Wonder is to curiosity what ecstasy is to mere pleasure. Wonder is not astonishment, either. Astonishment is too brief. The only limit to the duration of wonder is the limit of our ability to remain open.

I believe some people live in a state of constant wonder. I believe they're the best people on Earth. I believe it is wonder, even more than fidelity, that keeps marriages alive. I believe it's wonder, even more than courage, that conquers fear of death. I believe it is wonder, not D.A.R.E. bumper stickers, that keeps kids off drugs. I believe, speaking of bumper stickers, that it's wonder, even more than me, who I want to "HUG MY KIDS YET TODAY," because wonder can keep on hugging them, long after I'm gone.

4. **One warm May** evening a couple of years before he died, Henry and I sat in lawn chairs on a rocky point, overlooking the runoff-swollen trout stream that runs through my backyard. This evening marked the first time I'd seen Henry since he'd suffered his stroke. The hundred-foot walk from my house to the rocky point was a slow, serious undertaking. The stroke had clearly returned a few pieces of my friend back to the "mountains, rivers, and great earth" from whence they'd come.

As we sat above the fast green water, I told Henry of spectacular seasonal changes I'd witnessed on the creek over the past year, of encounters with local wildlife, of fish I'd hooked in the flow right before our eyes. Henry listened calmly, but seemed more interested in the unaccompanied sound of the stream.

I stopped my babbling and let the creek's take over. The evening was beautiful, the sun warm, and I was relieved at once by the cessation of my own voice. I was sinking into things, giving myself to the day, and to the curious tension that rises when we sit long, without speaking, with a friend—when I suddenly noticed something odd going on with Henry.

He was seated directly to my right. And he'd begun to slump way over on the right side of his chair. The ground beneath our chairs was rough and rocky. He kept slumping farther. Fearing he'd fall—fearing some strange symptom of his stroke had set in—I surreptitiously placed my foot on the base of his chair and held it firmly down.