

WONDER PRINCIPLE

Mystery creates wonder, and wonder is the basis of man's desire to understand¹

When I lived in Congo, I received proposal after proposal. People would spend time and money creating packaged documents, complete with organized headings and detailed budgets at the end. Initially, I believed that a well-written project was the first step to successful development. However, I soon learned I was mistaken; most of these projects failed. As a result, I stopped accepting proposals. I would hold up my hands and apologize, saying, “I don’t want your proposal. Instead, tell me about your dreams.”

The first step to successful development is not a written proposal, but a culture that allows people to dream. To dream is to wonder, and to wonder is more than just appreciating the view; it is to yearn. I savour that yearning, even with its incompleteness. It takes me into a realm of mystery, and I find excitement in that mystery. Wonder and mystery are integral parts of the stories we read and hear. When I gaze into the night sky and ponder its meaning, it inspires me to seek inquiry and understanding. This is why, in development, it’s crucial to encourage people to wonder and to legitimize their dreams.

During my time in Congo, I spent a lot of time listening, particularly to medical school students, whom I viewed as a key group. In Congo, the pursuit of medical training is driven by a vision to make a difference. My informal discussions with these students were among the most rewarding experiences of my time there; they were not about funding a project but rather about respecting and acknowledging their stories. This approach fostered a sense of confidence and assurance in the students that carried through to their graduation and into their professional lives.

If you wish to build a ship, do not give directions and technical advice to others. Rather, show them the wonder and adventure of the open ocean.²

¹ Neil Armstrong

² George Edwin Goodfellow, 2008 Rhode Island Teacher of the Year in *1001 Smartest Things Teachers Ever Said*, Edited by Randy Howe, 2010 p51. This is a paraphrase from *Oeuvres* (p687) by Antoine de Saint - Exupery in 1959, who wrote (translated), “One will weave the canvas; another will fell a tree by the light of his ax. Yet another will forge nails, and there will be others who observe the stars to learn how to navigate. And yet all will be as one. Building a boat isn’t about weaving canvas, forging nails, or reading the sky. It’s about giving a shared taste for the sea, by the light of which you will see nothing contradictory but rather a community of love.”

An essential element of instilling confidence is reflecting on the past. We should ask ourselves questions like, “Who are we? What is our community culture? What is our rhythm?” However, many individuals living in poverty feel that they lack a worthwhile story. They often cast aside their past, much as they would discard an old coat they believe has outlived its usefulness. The challenge in development is convincing these individuals that their stories are indeed valid and worth sharing.

It's a significant oversight to assume that the poor have nothing of value. For example, in the streets of Kinshasa, visitors might first notice the garbage and mud, often overlooking the more profound significance beneath the surface. Over the years of walking through the city, I discovered its hidden value. One notable experience was when I found an unconscious homeless boy on the street and carried him to a clinic about ten blocks away. As I approached, they knew I was coming. Everyone was aware of my jogging routine.

Considering the political turmoil in Congo, I relied heavily on this community network to alert me to any dangers in the city. This network proved to be a far more effective warning system than my own Canadian embassy. It was a hidden treasure: an efficient communication network that would be hard to find in any neighbourhood in Canada. This sense of wonder leads to investigation and examination, which ultimately uncovers the hidden values within a community.

Wondering often involves looking up at the sky and asking questions, but it also encompasses asking questions about our lives on the ground. Why do we do the things we do? What are our stories from the past, and what do they mean for us now? Exploring and investigating our past is essential for understanding who we are. Discovering our identity serves as the foundation for transformation.

My community has lost touch with its hidden values. Rapid technological changes have resulted in an underappreciation of where we've come from. We often think that the elderly have little to teach us in a world dominated by smartphones and online apps. However, finding deeper purpose and contentment today is just as challenging as it was in the past. By asking questions about our history, we can gain insights into our present.

The Wonder Principle asserts that, whether wealthy or impoverished, the capacity to wonder and inquire is a fundamental aspect of being human. Wondering enables us to look into the past and uncover often-overlooked treasures. The experiences of an impoverished community hold value and are crucial for fostering positive change.

Summary Statement:

A spirit of inquiry is essential for unlocking the resources within a community while also creating a space for individuals to recognize deeply seated dreams and possibilities that they might otherwise overlook.

Discussion

1. Make a list of projects or programs you believe have failed. Is there a common factor among them that contributed to their failure?
2. Compile a list of projects or programs you feel were successful. Is there anything they share that may have contributed to their success?
3. Reflect on your own history and create a timeline of significant events. Why were these events important? Now, do the same for your community.
4. Consider your community. What are your hopes for it? Are there specific changes you wish to see? Do you envision potential improvements?
5. Can you think of ways to provide environments where people can dream and explore their ideas?
6. What opportunities exist in your community for elderly individuals to share their stories?