



ORDINARY Miracles

An Invitation to Wonder

Philip St. Romain



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A famous Harvard psychologist once declared that the objective of science is to eliminate mystery. Not true. In these brief and carefully crafted meditations, Philip St. Romain creatively weaves a scientifically informed thoughtfulness into a spiritually profound pedagogy into mystery. I found these gems lucid, lovely, and spiritually moving. I think you will too.

—John F. Haught, Georgetown University, author, *God after Einstein*

Drawing on his rich science background, theologian and spiritual guide Phil St. Romain does what is so needed today: He bridges between science and religion. He speaks to the *Nova*-watchers and to those seeking a deeply incarnational spirituality. All of us meet where there is wonder...it gets us every time.

—Carla Mae Streeter, OP, professor emerita, Aquinas Institute of Theology St. Louis, and author, *Foundations of Spirituality: The Human and the Holy; A Systematic Approach*

In *Ordinary Miracles*, Philip St. Romain turns our attention—gently but unmistakably—back to the wonder that saturates reality for anyone willing to look closely. Against the modern myth that our world needs to be re-enchanted, Phil reminds us that it is already enchanted—radiantly so—and that what we truly need is to have ourselves un-disenchanted. With clarity and accessibility, he guides readers through the great aporiae that mark our existence: the origins of the cosmos, life, sentience, and consciousness and the sheer excess of beauty, goodness, freedom, unity, and meaning that so clearly overflow any tidy emergentist or strictly adaptive account of natural selection. I want to put one in the hands of each of my children and grandchildren. It has an accessible intergenerational appeal.

—John Sylvest, coauthor, “Reasons and Values of the Heart in a Pluralistic World,”
Studies in Interreligious Dialogue

In *Ordinary Miracles*, Philip St. Romain’s rare formation as both scientist and spiritual director enables him to present accessible science as an invitation to spiritual wonder, showing how insight into the physical and biological world awakens gratitude, humility, and love—and lifts us in praise of God.

—Jerry Truex, PhD, author, *The Problem of Blasphemy: The Fourth Gospel and Early Jewish Understandings*

Philip St. Romain was an integral staff member of the Dominican Sisters’ Heartland Center for Spirituality for twenty-eight years. His love of study synced well with our commitment to study, and numerous classes, discussion groups, and workshops evolved from our joint love of study. In his latest book, *Ordinary Miracles*, Phil presents a fascinating compilation of scientific facts, contemplative insights, and thought-provoking questions that can assist us in putting a new focus to lifting up our hearts and minds in these troublesome days. I highly recommend it!

—Sister Renee Dreiling, OP, Heartland Center for Spirituality

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*There are only two ways to live your life.
One is as though nothing is a miracle.
The other is as though everything is a miracle.*

UNKNOWN

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Introduction

wonder n.

1a: a cause of astonishment or surprise; b: miracle

2: the quality, sense, or state of exciting, amazed admiration

3a: rapt attention or astonishment; b: feeling of doubt or uncertainty

(Excerpted from *Merriam-Webster* online dictionary: merriam-webster.com)

Surely, wonder is one of the most uniquely human experiences. Different animals evince fear, loneliness, anger, pleasure, and even something akin to love. But only human beings possess the mental sophistication required for perceiving the mysterious tinges of reality.

But what precisely do we mean by *wonder*? As *Merriam-Webster's* second definition states, wonder is an attitude of “exciting, amazed admiration.” Excitement, amazement, and admiration: these are very desirable feelings, but they’re only part of the experience of wonder. We might also identify gratitude, joy, and humility as important subsets of wonder, along with a profound sense of awe. In addition, there is the curious capacity of wonder to stimulate the intellect, imagination, and memory in a context of self-forgetfulness. It is one of the most refreshing and truly recreative experiences we can enjoy! Only music is comparable in this regard; music that conveys a sense of wonder may well be among the greatest and most valuable human treasures.

The question that naturally arises at this point is: How do we come to know wonder? Does it just happen, like a sunny day? Fortunately, there are several things we can do to dispose ourselves to experiences of wonder, but there’s a gratuitous element involved as well. Like all feelings, wonder is rooted in a certain way of perceiving and interpreting reality. As *Merriam-Webster's* definitions 1a and 1b hint, the feeling of wonder is evoked by a perception of surprise and by the miraculous. If we are to cultivate a sense of wonder in our lives, we must learn to recognize and appreciate the surprising aspects of life. That is what this book is about.

Cultivating a Sense of Wonder

The somewhat spiritual properties of wonder might lead us to think that such an experience is only for mystics and a few other “deserving” ones. Be assured that most people are capable of living a life enriched by wonder. Healthy children enjoy wonder multiple times each day; it’s part of their normal emotional outlook. For adults, the challenge is to recapture that childlike openness and humility. We are all capable of growing in this regard, but

we may have to give up a few habits and cultivate certain disciplines to become more open to the experience of wonder.

Fortunately, we can make room in our minds for wonder. The following are all positive steps, and each is sufficient on its own. To be open to the surprises and miracles in everyday life, we must:

- Empty our minds of mental static and fragmentary clutter. Prayer, meditation, exercise, and silence are common ways to declutter internally.
- Learn as much as possible about our world, its people, and the deep connections between all things. We will reflect on this at times during the course of this book.
- Strive to see things from the point of view of other people (and even animals and plants) to help us get out of our incessant self-referencing.
- Be willing to struggle with questions concerning the meaning of life. This helps the mind become more open to mystery.
- Keep our attention in the present moment as much as possible. Most of us spend too much time ruminating over the past and planning the future when life is happening in each moment right in front of us.
- Cultivate a sense of gratitude for our lives and the many gifts we are blessed with each day.

We also must overcome roadblocks to wonder. Certain attitudinal and behavioral habits are antithetical to the perception of surprises and mystery. Consider the following:

- Self-concern makes it difficult to perceive reality clearly because during times of self-concern, we try to manipulate reality toward our own ends.
- Overanalyzing and labeling phenomena can squelch wonder, especially if our explanations diminish curiosity and lead to intellectual snobbery.
- Certain modern philosophies that emphasize materialistic explanations may inhibit our capacity for wonder.
- Mental sloth, or lack of interest in the world, keeps us self-concerned.
- Self-righteousness, especially regarding our own opinions, leaves no room for surprises and mystery.
- A noisy lifestyle keeps the mind excessively agitated.
- Alcohol and drug abuse reinforce selfish behavior and diminish the brain's capacity to respond to natural pleasures.

If we were to cultivate the aforementioned disciplines and surmount the roadblocks, we would surely experience wonder more often. But even after doing this, we will find that *wonder comes when wonder wills*. Unlike anger, in which we can more easily indulge, wonder is

a gratuitous experience—a gift that is given to us. Wonder has a self-transcending quality that naturally links it with religious experiences. For many, wonder naturally evokes a sense of the divine or a deeper gratitude toward life itself.

About This Book

I wrote this book with two objectives in mind. First, I hope to point out the significance of wonder and its place in human life, which I began to sketch out in this introduction. Second, I would like to provoke a sense of wonder in readers by sharing tidbits of interesting information about life and creation taken from a variety of disciplines. Because I believe that the findings of science can tremendously enrich our sense of the wonder of creation, many of the reflections in this book make use of scientific information. The journaling prompts following each reflection can help us become open to making a spiritual connection with the material.

A suggestion: Do not read too many of the reflections in one sitting. Take your time. Let yourself become immersed in each reading; perhaps reread each one slowly and meditatively several times before journaling. Let yourself be open to the tinges of mystery you experience, and welcome whatever meanings are revealed. Sometimes, it will be hours later when you realize the full impact of the meditation. Be grateful for whatever it awakens in you.

About Spiritual Journaling

What Is Spiritual Journaling?

At its heart, spiritual journaling is the practice of writing to deepen your relationship with God. It's not merely about putting words on a page, but engaging your mind, heart, and soul in response to God's presence and revelation in your life. Through reflection, prayerful writing, and honesty, you create space for God to speak and for you to listen, remember, and respond.

For centuries, spiritual seekers—from biblical figures to modern-day saints—have written down their prayers, struggles, questions, insights, and hopes. This practice helps us integrate what we hear, learn, and experience in our faith journey.

Think of your journal as a sacred space on paper—one that no one else needs to see but God and you. It is a place where you can be real, vulnerable, and authentic. As you write, your pen becomes a tool of prayer, and your journal becomes a record of grace. Spiritual journaling allows you to reflect on your personal experience as you begin to articulate what faith means for you. The intention is not academic mastery but transformation. By writing regularly, you allow the Holy Spirit to work deeply and personally in you.

Who Is This Book For?

Whether you are brand new to the faith or longing to grow in your spiritual life, this book with its thought-provoking journal prompts welcomes you as you are. You don't need to be a skilled writer or a theologian. All you need is to be open to letting God meet you on these pages.

Theological Foundations for Journaling

Faith Seeks Understanding (St. Anselm)

The Catholic faith is not just received—it is lived in. Saint Anselm described theology as “faith seeking understanding.” Journaling is one way to seek understanding—not just intellectually, but also emotionally and spiritually.

The Example of the Saints

Many saints practiced spiritual journaling. Consider:

- St. Augustine, whose *Confessions* remains one of the most profound journals of the soul ever written.
- St. Thérèse of Lisieux, who wrote her *Story of a Soul* as a spiritual memoir filled with simple honesty and deep insight.
- St. Alphonsus Liguori, who taught that spiritual exercises—including writing—help root us in God’s will and love.

Writing is a way of praying, thinking, and listening all at once.

How to Use This Sacred Pathways Book

Think of this book as a companion on *your* Sacred Pathway. You are free to write as much or as little as you like. What matters is that you return to it regularly.

You’ll find:

- Journaling prompts throughout this book.
- Scripture references and prayers to inspire reflection.
- Space to write freely, doodle, paste, or draw if you’d like.

Establish a rhythm:

- Read the prompt.
- Reflect quietly.
- Write from the heart. Don’t worry about grammar or form.
- Revisit your writing later for further insight.

Five Tips for Journaling Spiritually

1. Begin with prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your thoughts.
2. Be honest. This is your space. You can wrestle with questions, express doubts, and record joys.
3. Use Scripture. Let a Bible verse spark your reflection. Many prompts will include Scripture references.
4. Be consistent. A few lines in response to each prompt build a powerful record of your faith.
5. Review often. Flip back through previous pages. Notice how your understanding and relationship with God is growing.

Journaling as Transformation

Writing is not simply remembering—it is forming. It integrates:

- The mind (understanding and concepts).
- The heart (prayer and feeling).
- The will (commitment and action).

Through journaling, faith becomes more than ideas—it becomes a lived experience.

Your journal will become:

- A mirror for self-discovery.
- A repository of insights and prayers.
- A map of your spiritual journey.

In moments of dryness or doubt, you can look back and remember how God has led you thus far.

A Word from the Tradition

“The one who desires to be saved must continually examine the state of his soul, and journaling is a most useful exercise for such reflection.”

ST. ALPHONSUS LIGUORI

The Church invites us not just to learn the faith but to live and embody it. Writing brings this invitation to life. It enables you to pause amid the rush of new information and hear what God is saying personally to you.

Your Journey Starts Here

Let this journaling be a space of:

- Stillness in a noisy world,
- Clarity in a confusing time,
- Faith in the midst of questions.

Each page is a step in your walk with God.

Welcome to the journey. Welcome home.

Rev. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR
Liguori Publications



Day 1

In the Beginning

In the mid-twentieth century, many scientists argued intelligently for what was called a *steady-state universe*. This theory proposed that the universe maintained its density despite expansion and that it seemingly has no end. However, data from satellites and earth-based receivers no longer support this hypothesis. For one thing, galaxies are all moving rapidly away from one another, as if they were launched from a common point. Background radiation, space temperatures, and other factors strongly suggest that the universe began around 13.8 billion years ago and has been expanding ever since. There are several theories about how things might end, the most popular called the *Big Freeze*, in which the galaxies and their stars eventually burn out billions of years from now.

We could better understand every mystery concerning ourselves and the world we live in if we only knew what happened when the universe began, and why. The consensus among scientists—understated as the *Big Bang*—has it that everything in the universe was once compressed into a super-dense microdot of matter/energy with a heat of trillions of degrees. For reasons unknown to science, the dot began to expand, its temperature cooling as it did so. Matter and antimatter were created in nearly equal amounts. When matter and antimatter collide, they annihilate each other, releasing enormous quantities of energy. So, if the universe started with equal amounts of matter and antimatter, all matter should have been destroyed, leaving behind only radiation. However, a tiny balance of matter (one particle per billion) offset the available antimatter and eventually cooled, giving rise to the material universe and its billions of galaxies.

What was there before the Big Bang? Where did the microdot of dense matter/energy come from? There are several theories. As Christians, we believe that “In the beginning... God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). How and when God did this is not explained, but it deeply affirms our dependence on God for our lives as well as our bond with all creatures, who also are given existence by God. We are all made from the same “stuff” that originated in the beginning. Everything belongs together; everything is related.

Journal Prompts

1. Think: Why is there anything at all? Why not just nothing?
2. Consider the common origin you share with the creatures and things around you. Take note of the connections you share with them.
3. Write about your complete dependence on God for your existence. Spend some time in gratitude to God for your life.

Communal Bodies

Everything about our bodies and much about our experience of being human originated from the genetic material we received from our parents when we were conceived. These genes are contained in the DNA molecules found in the twenty-three pairs of chromosomes in our cells. Each of our parents contributed twenty-three individual chromosomes to make up the paired assemblage of forty-six chromosomes in the nucleus of each cell. Traits like eye color, head shape, hearing ability, intellectual potential, and thousands of additional characteristics are governed by genetic locations on our DNA molecules. We may therefore conclude that half of our inherited traits originated from each of our biological parents, and it's often possible to recognize how much we are like one parent or the other in certain ways. But that's only the beginning.

Our parents are the genetic creations of their parents—our grandparents—who each contributed (through our parents) 25 percent of our biological potential. Going back one more generation, we note that all eight of our great-grandparents also passed along their genetic material, which averages out to about 6.3 percent of our own. We could keep going, but there is a limit, of course, and that is the number of chromosomes in each cell—forty-six. Our chromosomes carry fragments of DNA from dozens of ancestors, each leaving a unique imprint.

Who were these individuals? What were they like? Their influence lives on in us in some way.

Journal Prompts

1. Resolve to find out more about your ancestors. What characteristics do you share with your parents? Grandparents? Earlier generations?
2. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us” (Hebrews 12:1). Offer a prayer of thanksgiving for the many people who have significantly influenced your life.

The Miracle of Health

Sickness is a common enough experience, but most of us probably view illness as abnormal and healthy as normal. Sadly, however, many people take their health for granted and are bothered when they get sick. This attitude reflects a common tendency to overlook the complexity of our health.

The human body and its routine workings involve thousands of intricate processes. Any little disturbance in one area can usually be countered by adjustments in other areas, but, in truth, we are always on the verge of incurring a serious health problem. Menacing viruses circulate within us, even during periods of peak health; one small slip-up in the body's defenses, and they can reach a critical mass, causing illness. Cancerous cells in our tissues arise routinely, but they are usually destroyed by leukocytes (white blood cells). Bacteria that help break down certain foods thrive in our intestines, but they could kill us if they were able to enter the blood vessels less than a millimeter away. Around 400 miles of capillaries, arteries, and veins channel the flow of blood in the brain; if any of these were to significantly rupture, it could seriously damage the surrounding tissues. To make matters worse, scientists have documented the adverse effects of mental stress, food preservatives, cigarette smoke, and trans fats. Already a precarious balance, health is often undermined by our poor lifestyle habits. It's amazing that there are so few hypochondriacs among us!

We know about practices that help sustain good health: a proper diet, a positive attitude, vaccinations, rest, and the avoidance of harmful habits like smoking. Even so, the mystery of sickness and death should teach us that health is a blessing and not entirely within our control. It is a gift given to us for a short while, ever tottering on the edge of sickness. The real miracle is that so many of us experience health as often as we do.

Journal Prompts

1. At any given moment, many things can go wrong in our bodies but usually don't. Stop and think about this. Note your feelings.
2. What is this amazing power and intelligence that coordinates the functioning and healing of our bodies? Give thanks.
3. "Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part, brings about the body's growth and builds itself up in love" (Ephesians 4:16). What is the Holy Spirit saying to you in this passage?