

Finding Wonder in Remote Places

JANIS B. NUCKOLLS

Good morning. I feel so grateful and honored to be here with you today. I would like to share some of what I have learned from voices expressing words of wonder, wisdom, and deeply felt truths. What these voices have in common is that they come from people in remote places who share a deep concern for nurturing. One of these places, a village in Amazonian Ecuador, is physically remote because its isolation from cities and towns makes it very inconvenient to travel there. The other place is experientially remote, although not so very far from us geographically. The second remote place is prison—specifically, the Utah State Prison and the San Quentin State Prison in California.

Let me begin with Amazonian Ecuador. A number of years ago, I was in graduate school working toward a degree in linguistics. Just in case some of you aren't familiar with this field of study, let me first tell you a bit about what linguistics is *not*. Many people assume that a linguist is someone who speaks lots of different languages.

This isn't necessarily the case. Another misconception about linguists is that they are "language police" who monitor people to detect how correctly they are speaking. This isn't what we do either, although we definitely take an interest in why people consider some ways of speaking more correct than others.

I would characterize linguistics as the scientific and humanistic study of language in all of its possible dimensions, but there are as many ways of being a linguist as there are people who call themselves linguists.

Linguistics and Wonder in Amazonian Ecuador

My own approach is called anthropological linguistics, which focuses on some of the unique ways in which languages and cultures are interconnected. To pursue this approach, I conducted research in a remote community in Amazonian Ecuador called Puka Yaku, which means "red water." This small settlement is home to speakers of a language called Kichwa. My goal was to learn

Janis B. Nuckolls, BYU anthropological linguist and professor of linguistics, delivered this devotional address on August 2, 2022.

this language well enough to write a dissertation about some aspects of its structure. I was also interested in how people’s ways of speaking might reflect assumptions about the world that were different from my own.

What I didn’t plan for were the challenges of living in a place so utterly different from anything I had ever experienced. There were no roads leading to Puka Yaku, no hotels, no grocery stores, and absolutely no running water or bathrooms. And there are still no roads leading to Puka Yaku, as I discovered last summer when I returned by canoe.

From the day I first set foot in this community, I was struck by the stunning rain-forest setting, as biodiverse and complex as any place on earth can be. However, despite the inspiring natural surroundings, it was easy to feel discouraged by my struggles with understanding the language and learning how to exist in this unfamiliar world. There were days when I could do absolutely nothing but lie in a hammock and stare blankly at my beautiful surroundings, wondering what on earth I was doing there.

Although the people I was living among did manage to enjoy my company at times, I was acutely aware of my limitations. Completing even the simplest task, such as helping weed a garden with a machete, left me with blisters all over my hands. I was always worried about imposing on people’s lives, although I helped in whatever ways I could—especially with requests for things that were not readily available, such as fishhooks and canned tuna.

Fortunately for me, the members of this community are among the most congenial people I have ever met. They love to laugh. I know this because my inability to do the simplest things was often what they laughed about. I found it challenging, for example, to stay clean while walking through the muddy jungle. I would often arrive at someone’s home with reddish mud splattered all over my boots and jeans. At times I actually enjoyed sloshing right through puddles. My friends would laugh and say that I was acting like a wild forest pig. *They* kept themselves as clean as possible, always wiping off whatever mud they had on their feet and legs before approaching someone’s house.

My friends’ ability to stay clean amid the muddy surroundings was just one of the many things that gave me reason to wonder, and this wonder often helped me step out of my low points and get back to work. There were many aspects of the Kichwa people’s abilities that inspired my curiosity. Although most of my friends have never had opportunities for formal education, their knowledge of their surroundings is comprehensive. You might even say that they practice their own form of literacy by reading the landscape, and their curriculum is based on observing animals, plants, and insects. What has always struck me about this group’s astonishingly detailed knowledge of their rain-forest home is the way they express this knowledge. Kichwa speakers are not afraid to “stand all amazed”¹ and express wonder about the world around them.

To illustrate, I would like to share an experience my student Auna Nygaard and I had recently while interviewing a Kichwa speaker named Belgica over Zoom. We were asking her about how various animal species take care of their young. Our friend related with vivid language and gestures how one type of fish mother will keep her babies safe from predators by allowing them to enter her mouth so that she can protect them as she swims. This amazing account was summarized by our friend in the following translated words:

She darts across the water over to one side, taking her babies with her in her mouth. If there are no other fish there when she arrives, she opens her mouth widely and all the babies swim out.

Then, if even only one fish comes near her babies, she’ll attack it. After chasing it away, she will open her mouth widely again, and all the babies will go safely back inside.

My friend then exclaimed in Kichwa, with wondrous admiration and surprise, “Riki! Piskadowas yuyayuk man!” I translate this as, “Look! Even fish are such possessors of awareness!” Belgica added that this kind of fish might even be better at mothering than some humans.

I have always enjoyed these detailed and vivid descriptions from my Kichwa-speaking friends.

This particular description of a mother fish protecting her young included expressive gestures imitating the fish mother's lightning-fast darting movements across the water. In another imitation of the fish, my friend opened her mouth widely to show us how the fish mother would invite her babies into her protective space. It wasn't until recently, though, that I came to see such descriptions as having spiritual significance. This realization was inspired by listening to an interview with the anthropologist and linguist Mary Catherine Bateson. On a podcast called *On Being*, she told host Krista Tippett that the starting place for any kind of religious sentiment is a sense of wonder, because wonder leads to praise. To support her claim for the importance of wonder, she referenced Job from the Old Testament, characterizing him as

*a virtuous member of an institution. He's respectable. He obeys all the rules. He's complacent. He goes through the appropriate rituals that were required in his community at that time. But he's lost his sense of wonder.*²

I may be going out on a limb here, but I don't think that Jehovah would need to remind my friends in Puka Yaku of the need for wonder like He needed to remind Job: "Hearken unto this, O Job: stand still, and consider the wondrous works of God" (Job 37:14).

My Kichwa-speaking friends use language that seems designed to emphasize the wonder and awe of their surroundings. They love to capture the finest details of a sensory experience, which they imitate with vivid onomatopoeic words, expressive intonation, and gestures.

Bateson's insights have also helped me understand why the following passage from 3 Nephi 17:16–17 has always moved me:

And after this manner do they bear record: The eye hath never seen, neither hath the ear heard, before, so great and marvelous things as we saw and heard Jesus speak unto the Father;

And no tongue can speak, neither can there be written by any man, neither can the hearts of men conceive so great and marvelous things as we both saw and heard

Jesus speak; and no one can conceive of the joy which filled our souls at the time we heard him pray for us unto the Father.

Although this passage seems to be mostly about the greatness of Jesus's prayer, I think it also emphasizes the unfathomability of the prayer's effect on the people who heard it. In other words, this passage emphasizes the people's feelings of awe, reverence, and wonder upon hearing Jesus's words.

Although the people of Puka Yaku live within a culture that hasn't benefited from formal education or literacy, they have inspired me through their ability to read the landscapes of God's created world. Their careful attention to and enjoyment of the awe-inspiring wonders surrounding them have refreshed my spirit over and over again.

Linguistics and Wonder in Prison

Let me turn now to another group of people who have inspired me—people in a different kind of remote place, which is the world of incarceration. When the pandemic forced us into isolation and lockdowns during the summer of 2020, it also dashed my plans to go back to Puka Yaku. I hadn't been able to return since my dissertation research days, and I was anxious to reconnect with the people there. The pandemic also interfered with my student Chloe Rampton's plans to travel to Russia to do research for her master's thesis. As Chloe and I discussed possibilities for a new project, I couldn't help thinking about incarcerated persons who were living very restricted lives even before the pandemic and who had no access to many of the privileges many of us take for granted. How, I wondered, do they cope? How do they make their lives meaningful and satisfying under such difficult conditions? I had heard about the Utah Prison Education Program based at the University of Utah. This program offers college-level instruction to incarcerated men and women at the Utah State Prison. Additionally, Chloe had at one time expressed an interest in prison jargon. So we thought of a project that would involve both volunteering to teach a linguistics class at the prison and using online resources to study metaphors used for prison experiences.

Although Chloe could have simply used online resources for her thesis, it was important to us to experience the conditions and situations of people living in a world unfamiliar to many of us but that affects so many people in the United States. Shockingly, nearly one out of every one hundred adults in our country is an incarcerated person.³ According to some sources, the United States has one of the highest—if not *the* highest—rates of incarceration in the world.⁴

Immersing oneself in the worlds of the people whose languages one studies is called “participant observation,” and it is a hallmark method for anthropological linguistics and general anthropology. So Chloe and I traveled to the Utah State Prison to teach our classes almost every Friday afternoon during the fall semester of 2020 and the winter semester of 2021. We mainly worked with six students. One day I realized that if I had suddenly been struck with short-term amnesia while facing this class of students, without having any memory of the razor wire and the many checkpoints we had passed through to get to our classroom, it wouldn’t have been at all obvious to me that these students were any different from my regular students here at BYU. Their comments and observations about language were incisive. Two students in particular had graduate-student-like perspectives on the research articles we read.

Another student in the prison, who I will call Mia, stood out because of a story she told us during class one day. Mia had been involved in an animal training program at the prison, and she loved animals of all kinds. Her story was about rescuing a baby goose. For some reason, geese are everywhere on the grounds of the Utah State Prison. One day when she was outside, Mia noticed a baby goose that had become caught in the razor wire surrounding the yard. With prison being what it is, Mia had to ask the supervising correctional officer for permission to approach it and try to help it get free. The officer said no. After a while, though, there was a change of the guard, and a new officer came to supervise. Mia again tried to get permission to help the baby goose, which was still entangled and struggling. This officer said okay, and Mia and her companions helped set the gosling free.

This story reveals two of Mia’s qualities that really amazed me. First, she had the wisdom to hold on to her compassion and her empathy by allowing herself to feel for this baby bird. And second, she kept her sense of hope alive. After the first officer said no, she tried again. How, I wondered, did she hold on to her compassion and hope in such a setting?

Being able to teach students at the Utah State Prison and having opportunities to learn from their perspectives was a privilege I will never forget. It made the pandemic restrictions feel so much less oppressive when I realized how much freedom I actually had, relatively speaking. This realization was also driven home by what I learned from the online resources my student Chloe used to gather data for her thesis. She discovered a podcast called *Ear Hustle* that originates from the San Quentin State Prison in California. This podcast has won several awards and has even been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for Audio Reporting. The show is hosted by two inmates and one civilian who volunteers at San Quentin. Now in its ninth season, the podcast features narratives from incarcerated individuals about all kinds of subjects, including some extremely difficult topics. I listened to these narratives because Chloe was gleaning examples from them for her thesis. As I familiarized myself with her data, my heart was deeply touched by so many of the people featured on this amazing podcast. I would like to share some words from two individuals whose perspectives particularly affected me. They reveal wisdom and truth—some of it as profound as the beautiful knowledge from our sacred texts and great literature. I will let the first individual introduce himself:

*My name is Ronell Draper, but I go by Rauch. My relationship with people is pretty strained. I don’t trust them. From early on, they have been a source of pain for me.*⁵

Because of the extraordinarily difficult circumstances of his upbringing, Mr. Draper has cultivated a meaningful life within prison through nurturing—or, as they call it in San Quentin,

“looking out” for other forms of life. Here is how he describes what that is like:

Ronell Draper (Rauch): *I love animals, so yeah. Since I've been in prison, I've had black widows, tarantulas, a lot of grasshoppers, beetles, snakes, slugs, crickets.*

Earlone Woods: *At San Quentin, inmates aren't allowed to have pets, but some guys get creative, like Rauch here.*

Draper (Rauch): *Gophers, rabbits. I had four swallows, a toad, praying mantis, 21 snails, frog, a red-breasted finch whose arm broke, pigeons. I had a desert vole that was partially paralyzed. Teddy bear hamster, just really lazy with an attitude. A centipede, and it was a wolf. It was a bad little monster. I had two fish that had babies twice. I had a tarantula broke out one time, and my cellie said, “Yo spider got out.”⁶*

What can we learn from Mr. Draper, who might be considered a kind of Saint Francis of San Quentin? Here is what he says about why he does what he does:

I take care of animals because they teach me what I can't learn from people. It's unconditional affection or appreciation.⁷

Mr. Draper's ability to learn about and feel unconditional love is so moving to me because it attests to the beautiful possibilities for the human spirit. He has figured out how to experience what he never felt from his family but which every child is entitled to feel. Jesus Christ Himself experienced the unconditional love of His Father. Right after Christ was baptized and before He even began His public life of performing miracles, His Father praised Him, proclaiming that Christ is His “beloved Son, in whom [He is] well pleased” (Mark 1:11).

Let's consider another individual at San Quentin: Mr. Richard Lathan, a man who wears a special gold coat. This coat signals to inmates his special role as a caretaker of the seriously sick and dying people at San Quentin. Specifically, he cleans people up. He takes care of whatever messy dysfunctions are affecting their bodies. He describes his role and responds to the question of why he does what he does as follows: “My name is

Richard Lathan . . . and the job I do is taking care of people.”⁸

Earlone Woods: *You know, Nigel, I asked Richard why he spends his time taking care of the sick and the elderly, because it can't be [an] easy job.*

Nigel Poor: *Oh, man. No.*

Woods: *Why do you take that stance?*

Richard Lathan: *Because I was a gang member, so now this is my chance at giving back. This is how I do it. I figure, if I give back to life, then my life will be given back to me. Twenty-six years ago, I did take someone else's life, and I . . . attempted [two] murders in the process. I was young then; 21 years old then. You know. I'm turning 49 in January. I don't have the same outlook no more. I don't have the same ideologies. I don't have the same values, instilled street values. No. Don't abide by that. Know what I'm saying?*

Woods: *Richard's not getting any younger himself, and he's had his own health problems.*

Lathan: *I done had a seizure a couple weeks ago, and the only thing I can think about is taking care of them fellas. It's the only thing I can think about.⁹*

When I hear Mr. Lathan talk about his changed outlook—his new self—I can't help thinking of the words spoken by Oliver, a character in William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* who had plotted to help end his younger brother's life. After having a change of heart, however, Oliver affirms who he now is, saying, “'Twas I, but 'tis not I.”¹⁰ Additionally, when I hear Mr. Lathan say that the only thing he could think about was taking care of his fellas, even after his own seizure, I am reminded of Christ's words from Matthew 16:25: “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.”

Conclusion

In case you are wondering what all of this is leading to, let me retrace our steps. I have been talking about my friends in Amazonian Ecuador who have inspired me by their alertness to the wonders around them. My friend's wonder about fish mothers is not that different from my own wonder about Mia's protective stance toward a baby goose or about Mr. Draper's love for all

forms of life. The podcast hosts of *Ear Hustle* also expressed amazement and wonder at Mr. Lathan's dedication to serving the sick and the dying in the most selfless way possible.

Here is what I would like to offer: as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we have unlimited access to wisdom, truth, and blessings from our scriptures, our ordinances, and our covenants. Perhaps we should add a daily dose of wonder to our spiritual practices.

In his April 2022 general conference address "In Awe of Christ and His Gospel," Elder Ulisses Soares urged us to focus on the importance of cultivating feelings of wonder for the gospel and for Jesus Christ. He described the contagious feeling of awe he enjoyed while listening to a friend talk about what it was like visiting the Holy Land and knowing he was walking where Jesus once walked. Elder Soares stated that when we live in awe of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we are protected against complacency and spiritual apathy.¹¹

There is also scientific support for the benefits of giving more space for awe and wonder in our lives. A recent article titled "Awe and the Interconnected Self" surveys a variety of studies that report that allowing oneself to experience awe leads to an increased sense of one's connections with others and with one's surroundings. Authors Susan K. Chen and Myriam Mongrain found that such experiences can also lessen stress, reduce the kind of self-critical thinking that leads to depression, and inspire greater humility, generosity, and tolerance for uncertainty.¹²

Elder Soares's point about the contagiousness of awe and Chen and Mongrain's research about the power of awe to alleviate uncertainty were brought home to me just this summer when I took fourteen BYU students to Ecuador for a six-week study abroad to study the Kichwa language. Two days after we arrived, a national strike was declared throughout the country, and it lasted for eighteen days. This meant that many roads were blocked by protesters, and critical goods such as gas, food, and bottled water could not move freely. Although we always had food to eat, we saw a gradual decrease in fresh fruits and vegetables. We had to take cold showers. My students were

not able to go on short weekend trips to see other parts of Ecuador. In the final days of the strike, we were drinking boiled rainwater, and the gracious, hardworking people in charge of feeding us ended up having to chop wood to make fires to cook our food. All of this caused me some anxiety as a director looking out for my students. When we were almost two weeks into the strike, I questioned each student individually about how they were doing.

Although everyone said they were fine, what really helped me with my anxieties about their well-being was the way they often expressed their wonder at our surroundings. I have been to Ecuador so many times that I had forgotten, for example, how fascinating leaf-cutter ants are. Several students were captivated by the long columns of relentlessly marching ants. They spent time observing them in action, even noticing how some seemed to be altruistically helping others. One day a student announced excitedly at lunch that she had found their nest after following their trail for some distance. This discovery led to questions for our Kichwa teacher about why the ants' nests were built so far away from their food source, as well as about people and their food sources coming from distant places.

My students' wonder at the mysteries of leaf-cutter ants and of many other inhabitants of the rain forest was contagious. I was frequently drawn into their awe, and my anxiety about their well-being subsided somewhat. Although I was, in principle, taking care of them, they were also, without realizing it, taking care of me.

I feel so privileged to be an anthropological linguist because my research on language provides me with so many opportunities to connect with people whose experiences seem quite different from my own. I have tried to communicate my own excitement for this gospel by pointing out the importance of wonder and by expressing the wonder I feel when I realize that no matter how remote the circumstances, I find others offering compassion, whether they call it "taking care of," "looking out for," "nurturing," or "ministering." I leave you with my testimony that Jesus Christ's gospel is for all of us, and I say this most humbly in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. "I Stand All Amazed," *Hymns*, 2002, no. 193.
2. Mary Catherine Bateson, interviewed by Krista Tippett, host, in podcast episode "Mary Catherine Bateson: Living as an Improvisational Art," *On Being*, 1 October 2015, 35:33–35:56, onbeing.org/programs/mary-catherine-bateson-living-as-an-improvisational-art.
3. Peter Wagner and Wanda Betram, "'What Percent of the U.S. Is Incarcerated?' (And Other Ways to Measure Mass Incarceration)," Prison Policy Initiative, 16 January 2020, prisonpolicy.org/blog/2020/01/16.
4. Helen Fair and Roy Walmsley, "World Prison Population List," 13th ed., World Prison Brief, Institute for Crime and Justice Policy Research, prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/world_prison_population_list_13th_edition.pdf.
5. Ronell Draper (Rauch), interviewed by Earlonne Woods and Nigel Poor in podcast episode "Looking Out," season 1, episode 3, *Ear Hustle*, 12 July 2017; for audio, 7:19–7:31, earhustlesq.com/episodes/2017/7/12/looking-out; for transcript, 05:50–06:02, static1.squarespace.com/static/5bd0d552e8ba44146721bb3c/t/5cab9896f4e1fcb89d33e1b8/1554749601738/Looking+Out+transcript.
6. Draper (Rauch) and Woods, "Looking Out"; for audio, 3:07–3:51; for transcript, 01:38–02:22.
7. Draper (Rauch), "Looking Out"; for audio, 14:43–14:52; for transcript, 13:13–13:27.
8. Richard Lathan, interviewed by Earlonne Woods and Nigel Poor in podcast episode "Gold Coats and OGS," season 1, episode 9, *Ear Hustle*, 11 October 2017; for audio, 14:02–14:12, earhustlesq.com/episodes/2017/10/11/gold-coats-and-ogs; for transcript, 11:51–12:02, static1.squarespace.com/static/5bd0d552e8ba44146721bb3c/t/5cab8de30852295bca1f4621/1554746867631/Gold+Coats+and+OGs+transcript.
9. Lathan, Woods, and Poor, "Gold Coats"; for audio, 21:38–22:46; for transcript, 19:26–20:38.
10. William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, act 4, scene 3, line 135.
11. See Ulisses Soares, "In Awe of Christ and His Gospel," *Liahona*, May 2022.
12. See Susan K. Chen and Myriam Mongrain, "Awe and the Interconnected Self," *Journal of Positive Psychology* 16, no. 6 (November 2021): 770–78, doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2020.1818808.