

The Wonder Years



Old people tend to prattle on endlessly about these things, particularly the quality of their music.

→ Robert E.
Horseman,
DDS

ILLUSTRATION
BY CHARLIE O.
HAYWARD

*I hear babies cry, I watch them grow.
They'll learn much more than I'll ever know
And I think to myself
What a wonderful world!*
— Louis Armstrong
What a Wonderful World

A wonderful world indeed! A recent revision of the official Seven Wonders of the World regrettably failed to include what I consider one of the major wonders of any era, i.e., Old People.

Having been an old person myself for more than 25 years, I feel obliged to point out that, in spite of impaired body parts and integument the texture of Egyptian papyrus, most of us retain an enduring sense of wonder. Like Andy Rooney, who wonders about everything, we have no idea of how anything actually works but marvel that it even exists.

It didn't when we were young, you know: no plastic, no television, no air conditioning, no automatic transmissions, or can openers. We had ising glass that seemed to

be made out of sheets of mica. Nobody ever went to an ER, and we had Vicks VapoRub. Families enjoyed U.S.-made Philcos or Atwater-Kents featuring the latest in super-hetrodyne technology — whatever that was — and could receive four or five stations if coupled to a good outdoor antenna. Kids with an ounce of wonder in their adolescent systems made “crystal sets” in a cigar box with a couple feet of scrounged copper wire and a “cat whisker” touching delicately to a chunk of galena.

If you were lucky enough to have a car, a stick shift with forward, reverse, and neutral worked well with a manual choke, spark, and throttle. Most kids could make a sort of preadolescent Harley out of old roller skate wheels nailed to a 2-by-4. An apple crate with two attached sticks substituting for “ape hangers” completed the ensemble. This was hot stuff, particularly if an old license plate was nailed to the front of the crate.

Old people tend to prattle on end-

CONTINUES ON 465

DR. BOB, CONTINUED FROM 466

lessly about these things, particularly the quality of their music. Annoying as the anecdotal 10-mile barefoot walk to school in the snow can be, or recounting pushing a manual lawnmower for 25-cents to pay for an Abazaba and a Saturday afternoon at the movies, it was a wondrous time.

My grandparents were excluded from the technology loop with the discovery of electricity. It was an inexplicable mystery to them, but a never-ending source of wonder eventually involving my parents with the introduction of television, touch-tone phones, and automatic waffle irons. My mother, fascinated by it all, would lament, "I don't understand any of this!" My father didn't either. He and I used to wonder how pictures and sound could travel through the air by the thousands

and not run into other pictures doing the same thing. How could energy course along wires to everybody's house in the neighborhood and we could never see it, yet get a bill for it? Somebody knew; wondering about it kept us humble.

As the late, great G.K. Chesterton pointed out, "The world will never starve for want of wonders; but only for want of wonder. There is evidence the younger generation has lost some of the exciting ability to wonder. My granddaughter at age 4, when asked if she understood how any particular thing came to be, answered confidently, "keyboard." A keyboard, of course, the instrument by which miracles can be accomplished. No need to peer behind the green curtain to see what wizardry lurks there. The computer

generation— sit at your computer, fingers dancing over the standard QWERTY layout and lo!— the wonders appear!

All the CDs you ever coveted fit into a device no larger than a stick of Juicy Fruit. Plug it into your Bluetooth, slide it into your Blu-ray. It's that simple. But how does it work? Who cares, don't waste time wondering about it or trying to understand it. It just is, always was. Use it and move on.

What a shame! Wondering is always half the fun. Everyone should be made to take a course in astronomy where not a single question can be answered with keyboard. And that's why I like Old People. With the luxury of time, they wonder without guilt or frustration, and they know who Louis Armstrong was. ■■■■