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An Interview with Kate O’Neil, Author of *Wonder at Overcoming Anxiety*

Hailey Bernet

What is this class based around and the general theme, and who is the Fuller mentioned throughout the paper?

Kate O’Neil: So the class centered around wonder and the professor, Professor Derné, assigned readings throughout and the papers that were assigned for each class, I think we had three of them we had to incorporate these readings into. So Fuller is one that he brought up. So his full name is Robert C Fuller and he is a professor of religious studies at Bradley University. He specializes in religion and psychology. But he actually wrote a book in 2006 called *Just Wonder*. And so I think that that was where Professor Derné got a lot of his, or was kind of focused on, was his aspect of wonder. The class professor Derné created was a small class, so there were eight of us and with that size of a class, the community that we built in the beginning of the semester was just great. He structured it so we all got into a circle every day and we talked about the readings. But it was more. So in a lot of classes when you’re assigned reading, they’re really academic and they’re boring, you kind of don’t have a great discussion around it. So he also incorporated, just like our thoughts of what wonder is and what our view was. But another thing I should mention too, at the beginning of the course. We had no idea what wonder was. We had expected him to say this is the definition we’ll be working with and he didn’t, he said. What is wonder to you? So that was kind of something that we were working on throughout the semester, defining wonder for ourselves. Which also added another aspect of community because we were figuring that out together.

Have you been able to apply anything that you’ve learned so far and has this experience as a whole changed your perspective?

Kate: Yes. The other papers in the class were a lot about nature as a source of wonder, or looking at wonder in the good parts of wonder. And although that’s great, I focus my paper on the bad parts of wonder. So anxious, I talk about my struggle with picking my skin and I think that through writing this paper and then presenting it at GREAT Day, I was able to expand my definition of wonder to include the “bad parts of it.” And in terms of how my perspective changed through the experience, it was just recognizing that if it’s not a “good” experience, you can still transform it into one.

So before I had thought of my anxiety as kind of a detriment. It was this overwhelming sense and I was like, really being dragged down by it. But now with this wonder paper and through that class, I'm able to reframe and say, you know what, my anxiety, though sometimes is a burden, it does make me who I am and it does make me have the thoughts that I do. So I think just reframing the definitions of "bad and good" and like how we can work to make negative experiences shaped into positive.

What you have been able to take away from this wonder experience, which is kind of like the question I asked before, but also why should people pay attention to wonder.

Kate: So that's a question that my classmates and I were asking ourselves at the beginning of that course. It was called Sociology of Wonder. We were all sociology majors and it was a required capstone. So we took the class in hopes that it was just gonna be all good feelings of wonder. Like "woohoo!" and I can't speak for everyone else, but I definitely had the intention of going in just as any other class, and I'd forget most of it. But I think that wonder is important for people to pay attention to because it is not talked about. It's not. There's very little emphasis on wonder and the definition of wonder. And because I always thought that it had to be an aspect of, like, surprise or thought-provoking and it doesn't have to be. So I think overall people should pay attention to wonder because it expands your knowledge of how you feel. So providing or having wonder as an option just makes it easier to express yourself as a whole without wonder being an option. You're left without us, you're left without that ability to explain yourself. I'm going with that wonder and then, umm, like the opposite of wonder. So like the bad parts of wonder, if I didn't know what wonder was and what the bad parts of wonder entail, I wouldn't know how to reframe my anxiety experiences. Or, you know, picking my nails or what have you. And I think that it's just so helpful to frame what you're going through, whereas using other emotions or feelings like happiness or sadness. Those are so used, like so overused and so generalizable. Whereas wonder, I think it's really amazing to be able to apply that to your own experiences.

How did you interact with other students in the classroom? Did you influence them or did they influence you?

Kate: Yeah. We definitely influenced each other. It was, again, community. It was. It was building this class that didn't feel like a class. We all looked forward to going because it was a break. We were talking about these big ideas, but we were in a space that was safe enough to do so without judgment. And again because there were only eight of us, It was really easy to form personal relationships with the eight of them and then Derné himself too. So they created this environment where I felt safe enough to explore these feelings with them. And then they were so receptive to that. Which I think not only helped me, but helped them too. The bond that we created, like all of the people, we're still in contact with Derné. He still emails us about different wonder experiences he's having and we'll respond with ours. This is going to sound terrible,

but I didn't really think that I was going to learn anything that I didn't already know, and now looking back, I've learned so much from that experience. I've gained friends, and a roommate. A best friend, and also in Derné, just a person to trust and to email funny pictures of chickens back and forth to as a source of wonder or talk about more serious things like anxiety or the problems in academia with stress. I learned to be more open with myself and my feelings and being understanding of myself because I was able to understand them.