

Honoring the wonder of God's world

What Does This Mean?

The world is extremely complex, and the more we know the more we are aware of what we don't know. Mystery is the acknowledgment that there are things in all areas of life—including science—that we do not fully understand or that still provoke a sense of wonder even when we have seen something of how they work. Scientists such as Albert Einstein and Max Planck said that science comes up against the mystery of the universe.

Science cannot solve the ultimate mystery of nature. And that is because, in the last analysis, we ourselves are a part of the mystery that we are trying to solve. Max Planck

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed. Albert Einstein

In the Bible this mystery and depth are acknowledged: there are some things we cannot understand fully. We can speak intelligently about the doctrines of the Christian faith, but faith and experience of God stretch beyond this, and most doctrines end in mystery ([Romans 11:33-34](#)).

Reductionism is a way of understanding and explaining complicated things by reducing them to their parts. It can (but does not have to) result in the mistaken idea that we can explain everything in simple terms. But the world is too deep and complex for that. Reductionism can lead to undervaluing, and students can end up thinking that human beings are “nothing but chemicals,” that sex is “nothing but bodies,” or that the materials of nature are “nothing but natural resources.” To be able to name, classify, label, or put to pragmatic use does not mean we have understood the true nature of something. To quote Aristotle, “The whole is more than the sum of its parts.” It is very easy to accidentally lose the mystery in life by using analytical exercises in isolation and unintentionally leave students feeling that this is all there is to it.

*We say nothing essential about the cathedral when we speak of its stones.
We say nothing essential about Man when we seek to define him by the*

qualities of men. Antoine de Saint-Exupery

What Does This Mean in School?

There is a lot of naming, labeling, classifying, and analyzing that happens in education, and this is helpful, but appreciating a poem is more than analyzing its words, structures, and techniques. Understanding a flower is more than labeling its parts. We can guard against reductionism and foster wonder

- by balancing analytical/naming exercises with fuller experiences (students can label the parts of a flower with a real one on their desks; a display can include both diagrams and images of flowers and attend to what flowers can mean in certain circumstances, such as “I love you” or “We remember”);
- by presenting things in ways that bring out their beauty and mystery, not just their properties and uses; and
- by explicitly raising awareness of reductionism (is a Van Gogh really just chemicals on canvas?).

Think of a lesson or unit that involves labeling or analyzing parts. How could the teaching and learning be planned to give a fuller experience? In a science lesson on labeling the parts of a human being, for example, you could display photographs or portraits of people.



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