

# Sense and Nonsense in the Wisdom of Dr. Seuss

*Herbert Anderson*

Encouraged by his grandchildren to re-visit the whimsical world of Dr. Seuss, the author reflects upon what is it that has made Dr. Seuss's writings so popular with young people. He suggests that the successful children's author developed a moral vision and universe which appeals to readers (old as well as young).

I puzzled and fussed  
And fuzzeled some more  
To find words robust  
For the wisdom of Seuss  
And his nonsense galore.  
My pen had a Skrink  
That drank all the ink;  
My desktop was Splettered  
So words were Unlettered.  
(The Cat in the Hat  
Would surely fix that.  
But the cat was getting fat  
Eating cake in the tub with a bat.)

I planned to write  
A rhyme like Seuss.  
But quickly found  
My words were bound  
By too much sense

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Without nonsense  
To apprehend  
His thought profound.  
And so instead  
With pen and lead  
I sought to write  
The remarkable wisdom of Seuss  
With prose ordinaire  
And hopings to spare  
To be un-obtuse.

One of the gifts of being a grandfather is having permission to read Dr. Seuss again.<sup>1</sup> Because I was only read bible stories as a child, I was delighted to discover the whimsical world of Dr. Seuss when my children were young. Now again as a grandfather, his mischievous imagination draws me back into the playful world of the child. The remarkable sounds of invented words make the same intriguing cacophonies and satisfying sounds I remember from the first time. The sounds may delight but they are difficult to make at first. The ear can hear more than any tongue can read. In *Fox in Socks*, Dr. Seuss acknowledges without shame how hard it is say words.

Please sir, I don't  
like this trick, sir.  
My tongue isn't  
quick or slick, sir.  
I get all those  
ticks and clocks, sir,  
mixed up with the  
chicks and tocks, sir.  
I can't do it, Mr. Fox, sir.  
Mr. Fox!  
I hate this game, sir.  
This game makes  
my tongue quite lame, sir.<sup>2</sup>

This awareness of the complexity as well as the joy of word sounds is part of the remarkable empathy of Dr. Seuss. He helps us imagine what a child learning to speak might be thinking. "My poor mouth can't say that, no sir, My poor mouth is much too slow, sir." At sixty-five, I know the feeling well. Reading Dr. Seuss aloud challenges the nimbleness of my tongue. I often wish Mr. Fox were around to say "bring your mouth this way, I'll find it something it can say." Throughout all his books, Dr. Seuss invites people to see a child's world in which

elephants hatch eggs on trees or the Cat in the Hat can take spots off a wall with Dad's two shoes or a Green Headed Quail might catch you from behind. It is the kind of nonsense that children love and adults never outgrow.

### *Fifty-Three Years of Publishing and Forty-Seven Books*

**D**r. Seuss is the pen name for Theodor Geisel who was neither a doctor nor a parent of children. His first book, *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, was rejected twenty-seven times. Editors complained that the book had no moral or message, nothing aimed at “transforming children into good citizens.” Theodor Geisel was outraged. “What’s wrong with kids having fun reading without being preached at,” he insisted. When it was finally published in 1937, the New York Times reviewer regarded *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* as a masterful interpretation of the mind of a child, creating the kind of stories with which children often amuse themselves and strengthen their own self-respect. Between 1937 and 1990, when the last, and in my judgment, the most profound book appeared entitled *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!*, Dr. Seuss produced forty-seven books of nonsensical charm and sensible wisdom. The universal appeal of Dr. Seuss is demonstrated by the fact that at the time of Theodor Geisel’s death in 1991 more than one hundred million copies of his books had been sold in eighteen languages (Morgan and Morgan).

The genius of Dr. Seuss is reflected both in his whimsical, slightly subversive, nonsensical rhyme *and* the way those stories quite effortlessly, and sometimes unintentionally, become effective tales that foster moral imagination. Dr. Seuss was a moralist in spite of himself. There are three foci for this reflection on the wisdom of Dr. Seuss. The first theme is the remarkable capacity of Theodor Geisel to enter the world of a child and see what the child sees. Dr. Seuss is an exercise in empathy that is often in short supply today in the response of adults to the child’s world. The first book, *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, is predicated on the assumption that parents cannot possibly see what a child would see on Mulberry Street on the way to school. Along the way, Dr. Seuss affirms some of the characteristics of childness that adults never outgrow. That is the second focus of this essay. The characteristics of “childness” that most adults struggle to retain include vulnerability, immediacy, openness and neediness (Anderson and Johnson, 22–26). Although he did not set out to transform

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children into good citizens, there are powerful moral themes generously sprinkled throughout the books. That is the third focus of this essay.

### *Seeing What the Child Sees*

The prologue to what happened on Mulberry Street is a conversation between a father and a child reminiscent of family dinner gatherings when a parent turns to a child and asks eagerly and expectantly “so, how was your day?” The parent hopes that what the child will report will correspond to the world the parents sees and knows. *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* illustrates why sometimes the child might say something like “nothing much” in response to parental desire to hear what they saw on the way to school, at school, or on the way home.

When I leave home to walk to school,  
Dad always says to me,  
“Marco, keep your eyelids up  
And see what you can see.”

But when I tell him where I've been  
And what I think I've seen,  
He looks at me and sternly says,  
“Your eyesight's much too keen.

“Stop telling such outlandish tales.  
Stop turning minnows into whales.”<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Seuss is sometimes perceived as subversive precisely because his empathy for the child's view of the world does not correspond to the parental expectations of an ordinary world in which the wagon is pulled by a horse. The parent's desire to know what *really* happened on the way to school is predicated on the conviction that reality is not socially constructed. The child's openness to constructing a world is not defiant or even subversive, as some parents might suggest, but rather reflective of the child's natural narrative perspective.

All the long way to school  
And all the way back,  
I've looked and I've looked  
And I've kept careful track,  
But all that I've noticed,  
Except my own feet,  
Was a horse and a wagon  
On Mulberry Street.

That's nothing to tell of,  
That won't do, of course . . .  
Just a broken-down wagon  
That's drawn by a horse.

That *can't* be my story. That's only a *start*.  
I'll say that a ZEBRA was pulling that cart!  
And that is a story that no one can beat,  
When I say that I saw it on Mulberry Street.

In the child's version, the zebra becomes a reindeer and the wagon becomes a sled which in turn becomes a big brass band led by an elephant which in turn becomes a big procession with the mayor and motorcycles leading the parade. At the end of the story, Dad says calmly "Just draw up your stool and tell me the sights on the way home from school."

There was so much to tell, I JUST COULDN'T BEGIN!  
Dad looked at me sharply and pulled at his chin.  
He frowned at me sternly from there in his seat,  
"Was there nothing to look at . . . no people to greet?  
Did *nothing* excite you or make your heart beat?"

"Nothing," I said, growing red as a beet,  
"But a plain horse and wagon on Mulberry Street."

I am struck by the child's embarrassment and sadness at not being able to tell a story that would correspond with Dad's expectation of what happened on Mulberry Street. When a child says "nothing" in response to a parent's ordinary question "what happened in your day?" it may not be disrespect as much as a sad and awkward conclusion by children that their narrative construction of the world does not correspond to the prevailing expectations of parental authorities. The ability of Dr. Seuss to see from the child's perspective is a challenge to parents and other adults to keep imagining what a child sees and feels because it is usually different than what the parent sees and feels.

### ***Qualities of Childness in the Wisdom of Dr. Seuss***

The appeal of Dr. Seuss for adults is because we never outgrow childness. I am using the term "childness" to refer to those characteristics of childhood that are beyond childishness and not limited to childhood. For that reason, childness is an inevitable dimension of all human life. We remain *vulnerable* long after we are no longer obviously small, weak, and needful. *Openness* is the experience

of wonder toward the world that enables the child to relish surprise and the unexpected. The *immediacy* of childness is what enables everyone to be playful and direct in affections and speech. We never outgrow the *neediness* of childness. In the kingdom of Jesus, Arthur C. McGill once observed, we always begin with neediness, we live toward neediness, and we always end in neediness.

### ***Vulnerability***

Children are particularly vulnerable in the literal sense of that word. They are susceptible to being wounded because they are small, weak, and needy. Eventually we may learn to walk and run and get our own food and even protect ourselves a little bit. But we never outgrow the experience of vulnerability that children and Dr. Seuss know so well. *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew* (1965) concludes with the realization that we cannot avoid having troubles nor is there even a simple solution to our troubles. Keeping our eyes open looking ahead to avoid rocks is not enough. Sometimes a Quilligan Quail will get you from behind or a Skritz from above or a Skrink from below. Such a dilemma prompts my favorite line from all of Seuss that captures the inevitability of human vulnerability.

And I learned there are troubles  
Of more than one kind  
Some come from ahead  
And some come from behind.

The journey to Solla Sollew (“where troubles are few”) is full of one calamity after another. Finally, he gives up his search for a trouble-free existence and heads back to the Valley of Vung, prepared for the trouble he knows he will have.

But I've bought a big bat.  
I'm all ready, you see.  
Now my troubles are going  
To have troubles with *me!*<sup>4</sup>

Violence with a bat is not the acceptable solution to troubles. The dominant theme in the book, however, is that vulnerable human creatures cannot escape trouble.

### ***Openness***

Two of the later books of Dr. Seuss promote the quality of openness to wonder and surprise. *Oh, the Things You Can Think* (1975) encourages imagination and wonder in thinking and *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* (1990) invites us to imagine all the things we might see in the places we will go. In both books, the presumption is that we have freedom to think what we want and go where we want. “You

can think any think that you wish.” There are no limits on imagination. We should not act on everything we think. Think and wonder. How much water can fifty-five elephants drink? The answer to such a silly question is obviously not important as the encouragement to imagine outside the box.

You can think about  
Kitty O’Sullivan Krauss  
in her big balloon swimming pool  
over her house.<sup>5</sup>

I am not sure why that image tickles me so but the prospect of floating in a swimming pool over my house is not as outrageously impossible today as it might have seemed when Theodor Geisel first imagined it.

Openness, as Karl Rahner describes it, is the “attitude in which we bravely and trustfully maintain an infinite openness to all circumstances” despite disappointments and despair that might prompt us to shut ourselves off from the world (Rahner, 48). In *McElligot’s Pool* (1947), a farmer tries to warn Marco that fishing in the pool was a pointless effort because it was too small and full of junk.

If you sat fifty years  
With your worms and your wishes  
You’d grow a long beard  
Long before you’d catch fishes.

Marco’s imagination and openness were not diminished by the farmer’s realism. There might be no fish in the pool “but, again, well, there *might*.”

“’Cause you never can tell  
What goes on down below!

“This pool *might* be bigger  
Than you or I know!”

This MIGHT be a pool, like I’ve read of in books,  
*Connected to one of those underground brooks!*<sup>6</sup>

The brook is connected to rivers that go to the sea where there are THING-A-MA-JIGGERS that make a whale look like a tiny sardine. “If a fellow is patient,” Marco says to the farmer, “he *might* get his wish.” The openness of childhood is hope not yet disillusioned by adversity and receptivity not covered with caution or fear. We must be prudent, that is sure. But the openness to imaging something new and untested and the willingness to be surprised are hallmarks of existence given and preserved in God’s promise to make all things new.

### *Immediacy*

It is difficult to read Dr. Seuss without getting caught up in the spontaneity and unfiltered delight of discovery and surprise. What is often lost in the careful calculations and measured responses of adulthood is the immediacy of childhood that is a prelude to wonder. When the Bingle Bug near Lake Winna-Bango asked *Thidwick, the Big-Hearted Moose* (1948) for a ride on his antlers, the answer was immediate.

“Of course not!” smiled Thidwick, the Big-Hearted Moose.  
“I’m happy my antlers can be of some use.  
There’s room there to spare, and I’m happy to share!  
Be my guest and I hope that you’re comfortable there.”<sup>7</sup>

There were unforeseen consequences to Thidwick’s generous hospitality as more and more creatures not only traveled on his antlers but took up residence. Nonetheless, Thidwick’s immediate welcoming response is a challenge to the adult inclination to calculate the consequences of any generous impulse.

Birthdays are awkward for many people. The awkwardness is not just about growing older but about being the center of unfiltered attention. Even when we long to be recognized, we may be embarrassed when it comes. The wisdom from Dr. Seuss about birthdays in *Happy Birthday to You!* (1959) is a delightful corrective to our reluctance to regard ourselves with wonder and gratitude at least once a year.

Today you are you! That is truer than true!  
There is no one alive who is you-er than you!  
Shout loud, “I am lucky to be what I am!  
Thank goodness I’m not just a clam or a ham  
Or a dusty old jar of sour gooseberry jam!  
I am what I am! That’s a great thing to be!  
If I say so myself, HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME!”<sup>8</sup>

This capacity for wonder and awe toward human mystery and the mystery of God is a critical spiritual capacity in an age in which instrumental reason and technology threaten to become the sole definers of what is right and true. Reading Dr. Seuss not only encourages wonder and imagination: it is practice in being surprised. On the way to Solla Sollew, the traveler in search of a trouble-free environment has fallen into a body of water where he survives without a toothbrush for twelve days. Suddenly he is filled with hope as a rope descends to pull him from his plight only to encounter another. General Genghis Kahn Schmitz recruited him to fight in a war against the Poozers. A child raised on the wisdom of Dr. Seuss is more likely to be prepared for the surprises of life.

### *Neediness*

In a culture that promotes strength and self-sufficiency, the neediness of children is often an unsettling reminder of human finitude and dependence. If we regard children with all their needs as fully human, then dependency must be included in any definition of what it means to be human even in adulthood. Our contempt for children often masks the deeper discomfort we have about neediness as part of childness throughout life. In *Horton Hears a Who* (1954), the faithful elephant is also the gentle protector of the entire village of *Who*-ville that lives on a speck of dust. Over and over again, Horton insists to his unbelieving neighbors that “a person’s a person, no matter how small.”

So, gently, and using the greatest of care,  
The elephant stretched his great trunk through the air,  
And he lifted the dust speck and carried it over  
And placed it down, safe, on a very soft clover.

Horton has trouble convincing people about the *Whos* he hears. So he asks the Mayor of *Who*-ville to make a ruckus. The noise wasn’t enough to be heard until the Mayor of *Who*-ville found a *very* small shirker named Jo-Jo who added his Yopp to the noise-making.

And that Yopp . . .  
Than one small, extra Yopp put it over!  
Finally, at last! From that speck on that clover  
*Their voices were heard!*<sup>9</sup>

Horton was pleased. The whole world of *Whos* had been saved by the Smallest voice of all. At a time in this society when dimpled chads may not count, Dr. Seuss challenges our inclination to disregard those who are small, weak, needy, and outside the mainstream with an elephant’s care for the smallest of the small.

## *A Moral Vision without Moralisms*

### *Faithfulness*

**D**uring my wife’s childhood and early adolescence, she and her mother had a simple expression that carried a moral imperative derived directly from the writing of Dr. Seuss. As Phyllis left for school or ballet practice, her mother would say “One Hundred Per Cent.” Whatever she did, she was expected to give it her all. This parting admonition comes from *Horton Hatches the Egg*, one of the earliest books of Dr. Seuss. Mayzie, a bird, tricked Horton, an elephant, into

sitting on her egg so she could vacation to Palm Beach. Reluctantly, Horton agreed to sit on the egg with Mayzie's assurance that she would be back before she was missed. Horton sat and sat through rain and snow until icicles hung from his trunk and his feet.

I'll *stay* on this egg and I *won't* let it freeze  
I meant what I said  
And I said what I meant . . .  
An elephant's faithful  
One hundred per cent.<sup>10</sup>

Other animals laughed at him and teased him but still he was faithful even though he was lonely. Hunters captured Horton and sold him to a circus in New York. Thousands of folks flocked to see and laugh at the elephant up in a tree. Even when poor Horton sat sad and alone in a hot, noisy tent he maintained that he meant what he said: An elephant's faithful—one hundred percent.

Horton's faithfulness was rewarded when the egg is hatched and it had ears and a tail and a trunk like an elephant. It was an elephant bird! Embedded in this whimsical story is a profound wisdom: faithfulness changes things. Of course Horton did not know that in advance. None of us do. The admonition to be "one hundred per cent" was given to my wife whenever she left the house without any expectation of the consequences. Faithfulness is a moral obligation without reward but it does change things in odd or unexpected ways. Just ask Mayzie, the bird, who flew back from Palm Beach to discover the consequences of her unfaithfulness.

### ***Care for the Environment***

One of the earliest stories, *Bartholomew and the Oobleck* (1949), is about King Derwin of the Kingdom of Didd who called in his magicians to make something fall from the skies that no Kingdom ever had before. The magicians worked their magic and ooblecks fell from the sky. It was a disaster. Ooblecks became green stuff that stuck to everything and then everything stuck to everything. Farmers stuck to plows, goats were getting stuck to ducks, and geese stuck to cows, and King Derwin's royal pants were stuck to his royal chair. When the king said the magic words "I'm sorry," ooblecks quietly melted away and King Derwin declared a holiday in honor of the four perfect, old-fashioned things that come down from above: rain, snow, fog, and sunshine. The affirmation that nature is good enough as is and should not be tampered with is clearly implicit. The contamination of nature with ooblecks is, however, more the consequence of arrogance and magic than willful abuse.

By contrast, *The Lorax* (1971) is a transparent treatise about the dangers to the environment of unchecked progress and greed. The old Once-ler lives alone

behind closed shutters at the far end of town where Truffala Trees once stood in abundance, Brown Barbaloots frisked about in their Barbaloot suits and ate Truffala Fruits, and Humming Fish hummed in a rippulous pond while splashing around. It was a bucolic, Eden-like setting until the Once-ler discovered he could make Threeds from the Truffala Trees until they were no more. Throughout the story, the Lorax was a persistent prophet who spoke for the Swans and the Humming Fish and Barbaloutts and annoyed the entrepreneurial Once-ler by reminding him of the tragic consequences of cutting down the Truffala Trees. When the trees were all destroyed, so was the town. Everyone had gone. Only the Once-ler remained, barricaded in his tower and alone until a child asks what happened to the town. After the Once-ler tells the story, he says to the child:

“But *now*,” says the Once-ler,  
“Now that *you’re* here,  
the word of the Lorax seems perfectly clear.  
UNLESS someone like you  
cares a whole awful lot,  
nothing is going to get better.  
It’s not.”<sup>11</sup>

With that, the Once-ler drops the last remaining Truffala Seed to the child, admonishing the child to plant it and “treat it with care; give it clean water and feed it fresh air.” Jonah, my two-and-half year-old grandson had me read this story again and again. When I asked him what the Once-ler gave the boy, he was quite clear that “the boy got a seed.” The assumed responsibilities that accompanied that gift probably eluded Jonah. But, if I may be pardoned a Seuss-like pun, the seed was already planted. It is difficult to imagine how a generation of children who heard about the Lorax and the end of Truffala Trees could still grow up to be unapologetic Once-lers.

There is much more moral wisdom hidden in these nonsensical tales. *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (1957) is an innocent story with a quiet anti-consumerist message about Christmas that has ironically been commercialized by the movie. In *The Sneetches* (1954), Sylvester McMonkey McBean appeals to human envy and promises to make them “the best Sneetches on beaches and all it will cost you is ten dollars eaches.”<sup>12</sup> *Yertle the Turtle* (1950) wanted to be king of the trees and the air and the birds. With five thousand, six hundred and seven turtles on top of one another, “I’ll stack ‘em to heaven,” he said. Then Mack, the turtle on the bottom who had had enough of being stacked upon, burped. And in a moment, Yertle the Turtle became King of the Mud and all turtles were free. The genius of Dr. Seuss is how effortlessly he has fashioned sweet morality tales from silly rhymes and nonsensical stories.

## *Conclusion*

This is an appreciative essay about the wisdom of Dr. Seuss. In another essay, perhaps, we could examine the negative side of many of the positive contributions of his legacy. We cannot invent words forever. Nor is it possible to think outside the box without connecting with the conventional patterns of thinking and behaving. Sometimes, the naughtiness is not cute because it does not have sufficient limits or realistic consequences. There is a frantic quality to the stories that perpetuates the inability to tolerate boredom already epidemic in this society. Not all mistakes can be fixed, as the Cat in the Hat would have the children believe. And for most people, there are real limits to the “thinks we can think” or “the places we can go” determined by race and economic status. Despite these criticisms, Dr. Seuss has managed to capture the ears and hearts of children with his empathic imagination. And along the way, without being a moralist, he has managed to provoke the moral imagination of children “who have ears to hear.” Preschool children, Robert Coles has observed, “are constantly trying to comprehend how they should think about this gift of life given to them, what they should do with it” (Coles, 177). Admonitions about good citizenship are generally ineffective. Rather, the empathic imagination of Dr. Seuss invites adults and children into conversation about stories of real struggles with troubles that come from ahead and behind.

So there you are.  
I did my best to digest (at your behest)  
Some thought from the nonsense of Seuss.  
There's more to find, I'm sure.  
You'll have to look yourself.  
You'll find the search a pleasure.  
It's bliss to write like this  
And play with words and make fun sounds  
Or tap your fingers in a row  
Or watch petunias grow  
Or read a book on How to Cook.

But when it's time for me to sleep  
And say good night to fish and sheep  
I hate to go without a peep  
Or add another word replete  
Of Seuss's wisdom deep.  
And so  
I tell the stories of the day  
And with dear Seuss I say and say

“From there to here,  
from here to there,  
funny things  
are everywhere”  
even New Theology Reviewiars.

### *Notes*

- 1 This article is dedicated to my grandchildren Jonah Anderson and Julia Febos, who love Dr. Seuss just about as much as their Grandpa does.
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