

Opinion **Life & Arts**

## Is there magic to be found in our everyday surroundings?

Small wonders offer a vital counterpoint to the things that cause us terror and sorrow

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'Pink Moon over Water' by Georgia O'Keeffe (c1924) © Smith College Museum of Art/© 2025 Georgia O'Keeffe Museum/DACS

A couple of weeks ago I was walking along a quiet tree-lined street on my way back from an appointment when I glanced down and saw a bright yellow maple leaf on the sidewalk. I smiled instinctively and bent to pick it up, twirling it by the stem between my fingers. I held it as I walked home, feeling in better spirits than I had been just moments before. It was the first changed leaf I had noticed this fall, and it made me a little excited for the coming season, knowing that the trees and streets would soon be full of yellow, red and brown leaves. I suspect what also happened is that this encounter made me feel briefly re-enchanted with the world.

I have been thinking a lot lately about the idea of re-enchantment, which to me is about remembering that we are connected to one another and to the rest of the natural world, and that the world can still evoke deep beauty and a sense of mystery if we open ourselves up to the feeling of awe. What could that mean for how we go about our lives, especially in times of global unrest and uncertainty? Not as escapism or avoidance but rather as a way to recognise, and reconsider how our lives are threaded to our environment and to other people in ways that can foster wonder, appreciation and even transformation.

I love the 1924 painting “Pink Moon over Water” by Georgia O’Keeffe. It is a landscape painting of Maine, created a few years before O’Keeffe began travelling to New Mexico. Here rows of green hills undulate across the canvas like waves, getting progressively darker in tone until they hit the blues of the sea and the sky. Just above the faint horizon line, a soft pink full moon rises, its orb reflected as a light blush across the sea’s surface. I have only seen this work

online and yet it is still able to instil in me a strong sense of awe and calm. The moon in its cyclical phases disappears and reappears each month, a testament to how dark nights and illuminated nights are part of the natural world. In such seemingly simple brushstrokes O'Keeffe reminds us of the beauty of the natural world. It is also a reminder that hills, seas and celestial bodies endure no matter what is happening on Earth. Which is one more way to consider how beauty can coexist with terror and sorrow. Perhaps this work can be seen as an invitation to pay attention to the beauty even in the face of the things that cause terror and sorrow.

Early last month there was a lunar eclipse resulting in a full Blood Moon. I was in Germany at the time and around 8pm I walked out to try to see it, but the buildings were too high. I walked for several blocks, feeling increasingly sad because I couldn't see the moon. But twice during my walk I came across two other people with their heads also turned upwards in search of the moon. I spent a few minutes with each person sharing ideas about the best place to catch it before the eclipse was over. Even though these people were complete strangers, in that moment we shared a common desire to connect with some elemental force beyond ourselves. It made my experience even more meaningful. I loved knowing that there were others in such proximity to me who were also hungry for this kind of connection and believed it was valuable.

Erin Milez is a Seattle-based contemporary artist whose work often focuses on how the routine nature of our daily lives can also be a call to notice and appreciate the smallest things and gestures. I was taken by her 2023 painting,

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“Caution in the Wind”. A young family of three, dressed in jackets and beanie hats, are shown bending down to a patch of earth full of bushes and weeds on the edge of a sidewalk. The composition draws our eyes upwards, starting with the little boy in the foreground who is picking dandelions with a smile on his face. Both parents watch him collect a handful of weeds as though he were making a bouquet of flowers. They encourage his wonder, and perhaps are themselves re-enchanted by the world around them through his eyes. Children often do help us to see the magic in our everyday surroundings.

But I also appreciate this painting because it suggests that other creatures both create and bear witness to this sense of wonder. In the top right corner of the painting, two robins are perched side-by-side, watching over a blue egg in their nest nearby. This small detail prompts our attention to, and respect for, the natural cycle of life. Who has seen a robin's egg in real life and not paused at the simple beauty of it? Even the ginger cat on the stairs, who looks like he is about to pounce on those gorgeous birds, is, to me, a signifier of holding the reality of beauty and terror, life and death, joy and sorrow in the same breath.

Yet somehow, with all that is going on in this colourful, rich painting, my eyes return to ground level, to the small weed about to be picked by the little boy. In a very short while the dandelion seeds will be carried off by the wind.

Impermanent like all of us. Even this tiny weed can pull our attention and ask us if we are willing to savour the gifts that are often right before our eyes. In some way I suspect that to become re-enchanted with the world and with our lives might require a willingness to bend our bodies and get closer to the earth and to one another.

In 1890, Vincent van Gogh painted his version of the Good Samaritan, the story from the Gospel of Luke. The previous year, the painter suffered a mental breakdown and admitted himself into the St Paul psychiatric asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, a former monastery surrounded by olive trees and wheat fields. While there he copied a mirror image of Eugène Delacroix's black and white engraving of the Good Samaritan and created his vividly colourful and dreamlike painting. It depicts a muscular man in a yellow tunic, blue trousers and a red hat, lifting a wounded person on to a horse. In the Gospel story, this man is a Samaritan (a group of people who were shunned by the 12 tribes of Israel during the time of Jesus) and he acts when others, who according to their supposed piety and beliefs should have stopped to help the victim, simply pass him by. It is only the outcast Samaritan who stops and tends to him.



'The Good Samaritan' by Van Gogh (1890)



In Van Gogh's painting we are caught up in a glimmering beautiful world of yellows and greens and blues and our focus is directly centred on the Samaritan hoisting the wounded man on to the horse. It is an intense action of literally sharing another person's burden as if it were one's own for the sake of alleviating their pain.

I am moved by the fact that Van Gogh painted this while he was deeply unwell. This painting seems to speak to Van Gogh's own attempts at re-enchanting himself with a world that must have felt bleak and insurmountable at the time. And I am even more moved that to do so, one of the things he chose to paint was this scene of deep compassion coming from the seemingly most unexpected place. I could not write about re-enchanting ourselves with the world without reflecting on how part of the re-enchantment has to involve our efforts to sustain one another, including those we might be least expected to assist because of different social, ethnic or religious standing. What world could truly be re-enchanted if it does not inspire us to bring colour, vitality and sustenance back into lives beyond our own?

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