

I'm not sure what exactly an algorithm is; until quite recently I'd never heard of the word. The world of algorithms just isn't my scene, though these days we can't escape them. They seem to rule our lives. They watch our every move online and seek to provide us with what we want. And that's why they make the world seem smaller.

I have a television which offers endless options, but apart from sport and news about the only thing I bother watching these days is YouTube. Once you decide to watch something, however, the algorithm presents you with a host of similar offerings. The range of options shrinks – just because the algorithm is trying to give you what you want. Yet it's not what I want. I want a far greater range of options; I even want surprises. But in the shrinking world of algorithms there are no surprises. I guess I could go to the Search function. But if I did, then once I chose a new option, that would start repeating on me endlessly, and I'd be back in the same shrinking world.

At a time in my life when the world tends to shrink anyway, I want the world to grow bigger and bigger. I have no interest now in travelling the big, wide world. I've done a lot of that in the past, and travel has expanded my horizon in all kinds of ways. At my age I want the world to grow bigger imaginatively, intellectually, culturally, spiritually. YouTube can help do that, though its algorithms make it more difficult as the range of options shrinks.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, once said of his own British culture that it is “deeply and dangerously bored”. That could be said now of Australian culture. We should be the least bored people ever to walk the planet. Many of us have fine houses to live in, smart cars to drive, plenty to eat and drink, even nice places to go for holidays. But still we're bored. We're like a child who opens a fridge stuffed with food and says, “There's nothing to eat”.

The trouble with that kind of boredom is that the world grows smaller and smaller. It becomes claustrophobic, leaving us with the sense that there's nothing to do, nowhere to go. A one-dimensional world ends up feeling like a tomb. That's why some people turn to opiates, which seem to make the world bigger, adding even a touch of magic, it seems, in a deeply unenchanted world. But the promise held out by opiates turns to something much darker; and making the world smaller, all they deliver is death.

The challenge is not to flee to some fake-enchanted world that turns to dust but to discover the extraordinary, the truly enchanted, at the heart of the ordinary. The story is told of an elderly Italian priest who had a gift of speaking to young people and was in conversation one day with a group of university

students, one of whom got up and spoke angrily about the Church and all that was wrong with it. The priests listened patiently and when the student finally sat down, the priest paused for a moment and then said simply, “I see what you see, but I see more”. That’s the challenge: to see more.

To bring the contemplative eye to bear on reality, so that an unenchanted world becomes enchanted, a boring world becomes thrilling, a shrinking world expands endlessly. This is the eye of a poet like Mary Oliver who in her poem *Sometimes* writes:

Instructions for living a life:

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.

The contemplative eye knows how to pay attention, deep attention which discovers the astonishing enchantment that’s all around us and within us. Oliver says the same thing in her poem *Praying*:

It doesn’t have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch
a few words together and don’t try
to make them elaborate, this isn’t
a contest but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

Pay attention, with the contemplative eye, even to weeds and some small stones – and you will, in the words of the English poet, William Blake, “see a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower”.

The cry that began this Advent season was from the prophet Isaiah: “O that you would tear the heavens open and come down!” That’s the cry from the heart of the shrinking, unenchanted, boring world where the heavens are shut tight; and it came from the prophet’s lips at a time when things seemed hopeless for ancient Israel. God answers the prophet’s cry once and for all when the baby is born in Bethlehem. With a gentle power, like rain or dew, the heavens are

opened and the world becomes enchanted, thrilling and expanding endlessly for those who see not just another human child wailing in the dark but God-with-us whose birth among us is greeted not by algorithms but by a surprising song of angels.