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A Meditation on Mary Oliver's "Wild Geese"

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Whatever else we may be, we are animals, highly evolved, human animals, subject (as the Buddha observed) to the natural pains of birth, sickness, aging, and death.

Beloved poet Mary Oliver might have added one more sorrow to the Buddha's list—the pain of loneliness—feeling disconnected, adrift, on our own, misunderstood, unappreciated, abandoned. All alone in the universe.

*In her most famous poem, "Wild Geese," Oliver argues that suffering is not a punishment, not a consequence of human sin or error or wrongness. Suffering is "what-is"—for everyone—an unpleasant but completely unavoidable, completely natural part of life.

Our sorrows, paradoxically, are the flip sides of our joys. Just as joy enters every life, nobody escapes pain, mistakes, sorrow. Pain and joy are inescapable. They're a package deal.

And however widely and uniquely our individual experiences with them may vary, they both offer rich opportunities for growth.

Loneliness is particularly endemic in the present pandemic. But some day, we'll look back and find at least some "silver linings" from this sad time.

Just maybe, now is the beginning of a meaningful political, economic, environmental, social, and spiritual global transformation! That's my vision.

"Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness," wrote Mary Oliver. "It took me years to understand that this too, was a gift."

It's easy to miss life's everyday gifts. We rush right past them in hot pursuit of imagined tomorrows, or in headlong escapes from yesterdays' ghosts.

We bumbling humans get so caught up in our everyday unsatisfactoriness—our feelings of not-OK, not-enough, not-right, not-fair, not-this, not-here, not-yet, not-ever—that we trample right over the evanescent particularities of right now, close our eyes to this moment’s expansive, extravagant possibilities.

A friend of mine once asked me, “What difference will all your worries make in a hundred years?” He wanted me to look up from my insistence upon figuring everything out, my determination to make sense of, well— everything.

I’m not sure what my navel-gazing ever accomplished, but following Mary Oliver’s poetic down-gazing pulls me back down to earth where I rediscover my intimate connections with grass and grasshoppers, stones and speckled eggs—all announcing my indispensable place in life’s interdependent web.

Or—just as abruptly, I’m following Oliver’s stargazing focus across a boundless universe, or, in the next breath, I’m suddenly sharing the lofty perspectives of wild geese flying over raindrops and passing fields.

Reading Mary Oliver reminds me, over and over, that all life’s exquisitely-different paths, no matter how small or insignificant, are essential parts of life’s natural order—tiny parts perhaps, but inseparable from a beautiful, terrible whole. We’re all waves—of one ravishing ocean; we are sunbeams—of one dazzling sun.

Oliver’s poetry gently, very subtly—radically—renounces conventional religious theologies—all such murky doctrinal notions as sin, guilt, judgment, repentance, even right and wrong; all burdensome canonical capital-T-Truths, all inflexible textual capital-A-Answers.

Oliver also seems ... bored ... by the supernatural. But I think she would have welcomed the Earth-centered traditions we celebrate here at UUCF—all the spiritual teachings so supportive of living harmoniously with the sacred rhythms of nature, of life.

Oliver was particularly fearless in asking the big, open questions—the questions without final answers. I’ve spent my life trying to understand, first, myself; then—relationships; vocation; art; men; marriage; parenting; science. That is—life and death.

My current non-answers to the big questions include: “Life is—a mystery!” and “It is what it is” and of course, “Everything changes.”

I will no doubt keep on seeking answers, keep trying to get life “right.” Apparently, I’m wired this way. Pondering such stuff turns out to be ... well ... my kinda fun! Wandering and wondering are just exactly what the soft animal of my body loves.

All our wildly different life paths are rarely what we expected or even wanted—certainly mine weren’t—but they are all worthy paths. Like our many disparate gifts—those we receive and those we give—all are valuable, important—holy.

If you’ve read or heard Mary Oliver’s “Wild Geese” poem before, I hope you’ll stay with me for one more quick reading. Here goes:

Wild Geese - by Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.