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**“What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”:
The Life-saving, Ecstatic Poetry of Mary Oliver”**

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Mary Oliver (1935 – 2019) has been called **“America’s most beloved poet”** (The New Yorker), and she has long been a favorite of many UUs. In 2006, Oliver delivered the Ware Lecture at our annual UU General Assembly. She read many wonderful poems during that hourlong presentation, and toward the end she made her way around to one of the poems that many people had been waiting for all night: “Wild Geese.” She introduced it as **“an old, old poem everybody wants me to read—so I'll do it.”**

Mary Oliver wrote “Wild Geese” in 1986. As you read, I invite you to notice if a particular word or phrase resonates with you:

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.

Krista Tippett, host of the program “On Being,” when she [interviewed Mary Oliver](#), described “Wild Geese” as **“a poem that has saved lives.”** I relatedly recommend [“Mary Oliver for Corona Times \(Thoughts after the poem Wild Geese\)”](#) written a few weeks ago by Adrie Kusserow, a professor of cultural anthropology at Saint Michael's College.

Mary Oliver was born in a semi-rural suburb of Cleveland, Ohio ([“Poetry Foundation”](#)). And she has been honest in [interviews](#) that she had a difficult childhood with significant neglect and abuse. To share only one of many such stories, she wrote in her 2016 book [Upstream: Selected Essays](#) of the time that, **“My father took me ice-skating, then forgot me, and went home.”** He didn’t remember that he had left her for many hours (Oliver 2016: 17). But it was also that toxic home environment that made her want to be out of the house as much as possible, and launched what would become a lifelong habit of long walks in the woods.

Regarding her childhood, if there’s one thing that has been most frequently misunderstood about Mary Oliver, it is that many people have wrongly assumed that she was able to spend her days wandering in nature because she came from a privileged, pampered, and wealthy background. The opposite was the case. As she has written about the early years of her career, **“We did not...have much income. We had love and work and play instead”** (Cook 47).

By “we,” Mary Oliver means that in the late fifties, she met the photographer Mary Malone Cook, who became her partner in life. As Oliver wrote in a volume of prose and photographs co-authored with Cook titled [Our World](#), although Cook was ten years her senior, **“I took one look and fell, hook and tumble”** (42). To make a brief

connection to our service back in February about the award-winning playwright and writer Lorraine Hansberry, you may remember that prior to being with Mary Oliver, Cook was in a relationship with Hansberry. Indeed, the photograph on the cover of an excellent recent biography of Hansberry was taken by Cook. Oliver has written about that relationship: “I believe she loved totally and was loved totally. I know about it, and am glad” (3).

By the mid-1960s, however, Oliver and Cook were a couple and remained together in their beloved Provincetown, Massachusetts for more than four decades, until Cook’s death in 2005. And although Oliver is the one famous for writing, I love this passage from Cook’s journal:

Mary has just returned with yellow flowers and a wet Luke [meaning their dog] who has been swimming in the ponds. I always ask her for news.... What I mean is news of humans. **Mary comes home with fox news, bird news, and her loving friends the geese Merlin and Dreamer**, who are going to become parents under Mary’s eyes once again. How many years has she been watching them? They come running to her. That’s Mary’s news. (72)

Along these lines, if there is one major takeaway from the life and work of Mary Oliver, it is the transformative value of spending more time wandering around in nature with no goal other than to being open to wonder — and most importantly *paying attention* so that you don’t miss all the unexpected things there are to see, hear, touch, taste, and smell.

In a poem from her 1994 collection, *White Pine*, she says it this way: **“To pay attention, this is our endless / and proper work”** (2017: 264). Similarly, from her 2008 poem “Sometimes” in the collection *Red Bird*:

Instructions for living a life:
Pay attention.
Be astonished.
Tell about it. (Oliver 2017: 105)

On occasion, her poems are that explicit about what to do. More often, her poems simply show us the fruit of her own close and patient attention to nature.

From time spent simply listening to bird song, she writes about “What Gorgeous Thing” in her 2014 book *Blue Horses*:

I do not know what gorgeous thing
the bluebird keeps saying,
his voice easing out of his throat,
beak, body into the pink air
of the early morning. I like it
whatever it is. Sometimes
it seems the only thing in the world
that is without dark thoughts.
Sometimes it seems the only thing
in the world that is without
questions that can't and probably
never will be answered, the
only thing that is entirely content
with the pink, then clear white
morning and, gratefully, says so. (Oliver 2017: 28)

Likewise, while “Just Lying on the Grass at Blackwater,” a sparrow’s song comes to her attention:

The little sparrow
with the pink beak
calls out, over and over, so simply – not to me
but to the whole world. All afternoon

I grow wiser, listening to him.... (Oliver 2017: 163-4)

I love that: noticing how we can grow *wiser* through time spent lying beside a pond listening to bird song.

Or regarding goldfinches, in a poem titled “Invitation” that seems quite relevant amidst our current pandemic, she says:

just to be alive
on this fresh morning
in this broken world

I beg of you.

do not walk by
without pausing
to attend to this
rather ridiculous performance
[she means the goldfinches engaged in a “musical battle”]

It could mean something.

It could mean everything.

I could be what Rilke meant, when he wrote:

You must change your life. (Oliver 2017: 108)

From reading Mary Oliver, I also appreciate her advice that: **“If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, / don’t hesitate. Give in to it”** (61). This sentiment reminds me of what is likely the most famous two lines Mary Oliver has ever written— from “The Summer Day,” which was part of her 1990 collection, *House of Light*. These two lines have appeared in so many places: spray-painted on walls; emblazoned on t-shirts, bumper stickers, Internet memes; quite a few people have these lines permanently tattooed on their body. The most famous couplet Mary Oliver ever wrote goes like this:

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

with your one wild and precious life? (Oliver 2017: 316)

One of the most recent places this quote has appeared is as the epigraph to Cheryl Strayed’s bestselling memoir *Wild*, endearing it to a whole new generation.

For now, as I move toward my conclusion, let me say a few words about Mary Oliver’s legacy. In 1965, the poet and novelist James Dickey (1923-1997) was invited to write a brief review for *The New York Times* of the then twenty-eight-year-old Mary Oliver’s first book of poetry, *No Voyage*. He gave her the backhanded compliment of being “good, but predictably good.” For the next more than five decades (from 1963 to 2016), Mary Oliver would publish at least thirty-six more books (mostly poetry as well

as occasional prose). But **none of her books ever received a full-length review in *The New York Times*.**

That being said in 2007, an article in the Times itself confessed that the last laugh went to the Oliver. Even if many poetry critics said some pretty harsh things about her over the years, she won “a Pulitzer Prize in 1984 and a National Book Award in 1992.... And [even toward the end of her life she remained] far and away, this country’s best-selling poet.... [At that time,] the top 15 best-selling poetry volumes in America...included no fewer than five Mary Oliver titles, all published by our own UU-owned Beacon Press of Boston.”

A *New Yorker* article from a few years ago on "What Mary Oliver's Critics Don't Understand" observed that,

Part of the key to Oliver’s appeal is her accessibility: she writes blank verse in a conversational style, with no typographical gimmicks. But an equal part is that **she offers her readers a spiritual release that they might not have realized they were looking for.** Oliver is an ecstatic poet in the vein of her idols, who include Shelley, Keats, and Whitman. She tends to use nature as a springboard to the sacred, which is the beating heart of her work.

To me this approach resonates strongly with the first of our UU Six Sources: “Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.”

If this poetry service leaves you curious to read more Mary Oliver, I recommend starting with her recent collection titled Devotions, published in 2017, a little more than a year prior to her death. Mary Oliver herself made the selection of what poems to include, drawing from the entirety of her career, and she put the poems in reverse chronological order, so the newest are first (Oliver 2017: 443). There are also two excellent audiobooks of Oliver reading her poetry, also published by Beacon Press.

For now, in the spirit of reflecting on Oliver’s legacy, I invite you to hear the conclusion to her poem “In Blackwater Woods” from her fifth collection *American*

Primitive for which she won the Pulitzer Prize. These words have always been some of my favorites that she wrote, and they seem freshly poignant these days:

To live in this world

you must be able

to do three things:

to love what is mortal;

to hold it

against your bones knowing

your own life depends on it;

and, when the time comes to let it go,

to let it go. (Oliver 2017: 390)

Relatedly, consider these words from the end of her poem “When Death Comes” from her 1992 collection titled *New and Selected Poems*, which won the National Book Award:

When it’s over, I want to say: all my life

I was a bride married to amazement.

I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder

if I have made of my life something particular, and real.

I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened,

or full of argument.

I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world. (Oliver 2017: 285-6)

Mary Oliver died a little more than a year ago in January 2019. The cause of death was lymphoma. She was 83 years old ([NPR](#)).

I think we can say looking back on the sweep of her more than eight decades on this planet that all her life she *was* married to amazement. She did not simply visit this

world. She took this world lovingly in her arms and offered back the fruit of her loving attention to all who would take, read, and then do likewise.

As part of the benediction each week, I invite us to notice that we are *different* for having spent this time together. And I know that I am *different*—I am a closer, more eager, more ecstatic observer of nature—for having spent more than twenty years at this point reading and re-reading Mary Oliver. In her writing, she is always teaching us, forming us, inviting us, luring us to pay attention to the world with the same wonder, awe, and devotion that she brought to her lifelong habit of long walks in nature. Her resulting poetry has been, and continues to be life-saving for many.

For now, I will leave the final words to Mary Oliver from the end of her poem "To Begin With, the Sweet Grass":

And what do I risk to tell you this, which is all I know?

Love yourself. Then forget it. Then, love the world (79).