

Mary Oliver: Love, Loss & Poetry

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Mary Oliver was a prolific and decorated poet. She published over 25 books of poetry and prose, including *Dream Work*, *A Thousand Mornings*, and *A Poetry Handbook*. In 1983 she won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for her book *American Primitive*. Her final work, *Devotions*, is a curated collection of poetry from her more than 50-year career. In 2015 she granted Krista Tippett of NPR's *On Being* one of the rare interviews during her lifetime — she discussed the wisdom of the world, the salvation of poetry, and the life behind her writing.

I invite you to sit back, put down your mahzor, loosen your tie or your belt, soften your shoulders, your brow, your sense of urgency to get on to “the next thing.” On Yom Kippur we are reminded that life offers us only moments to savor, like good wine, good art, good love.

Our journey will be guided by the poetry of Mary Oliver, one of America's great poets and teachers of our generation, who journeyed into the mists this past January 17th at the age of 83.

Krista Tippett visited Ms. Oliver in southern Florida where Mary Oliver moved after the illness and death of her longtime partner, the photographer Molly Malone Cook.

Mary Oliver was born in 1935 and grew up in a small town in Ohio. She lived and wrote for five decades in Provincetown, Massachusetts on Cape Cod, and her poetry is vivid with a sense of place.

Today Oliver's poetry will weave together the conversations we've had over the holidays. I invite you to listen for what could make a difference in your life this year. What is the message you came to hear? Listen for it. Pull it towards you.

On Rosh Hashana eve we studied the story of Jonah and reflected on our desire to run. One Rosh Hashana day we heard from Eve and her contemporary call for us to become one with creation. Last night Hannah spoke out and the heavens heard her shofar-blasting-truth-telling call. And today, we hear the poetry of Mary Oliver, of blessed memory, on love, loss and poetry itself.

Later in the lobby you will find a souvenir of our High Holiday journey together. You'll be able to take a piece of hand-blown Oregon glass and a poem inspired by one of these four sermons to support you on your path. Over the months to come I invite you to come see me, bring your shard of Oregon glass and your verse and tell me what it means for you and how it's unfolding. Today, listen for the message you need.

First, we recall the Jonah in each of us and ask again, bringing in the voice of Pulitzer Prize winning poet, Mary Oliver, why do we run?

Poet Oliver cited a childhood of sexual abuse and neglect. In the interview on NPR Oliver shares, *“I saved my own life by finding a place that wasn’t in that house. That was my strength, but I wasn’t all strength. It would have been a very different life. Whether I would have written poetry or not, who knows?”*

For so many of us we had the childhoods we had, the trauma and the drama of our careers, our marriages, all of this becomes the source from which we write our lives. Oliver’s life in her home led her outside, into the natural world or as she calls in, “the door of the temple.”

Tippet notes that Oliver has “such a capacity for joy, especially in the outdoors. Right? You transmit that. And it’s that joy — if you’re capable of that, how much more of it would there have been?”

This question moves me. How much art is born of pain and loss. How much genius is inspired by heartbreak?

Oliver, I believe speaks for many of us when she says, “Poetry is a pretty lonely pursuit. And, in many cases I used to think, I don’t do it anymore — but that I’m talking to myself. There was nobody else that in that house I was going to talk to. It was a very difficult time and a long time. And I don’t understand some people’s behavior.”

This honesty continues in her poem, "The Uses of Sorrow, in her book *Thirst*. In this poem, like Jonah, she finds herself asleep, in the belly of the whale and writes:

The Uses Of Sorrow

(In my sleep I dreamed this poem)

Someone I loved once gave me
a box full of darkness.

It took me years to understand
that this, too, was a gift.

Tippett astutely notes that it's Oliver's honesty, with its bumps and scars "is a gift that [she] give[s] to [her] readers... [her] ability to love [her] "one wild and precious life" is hard won.

As Oliver bravely asks in one of her poems *Long Life*: "What can we do about God, who makes and then breaks every god-forsaken, beautiful day?"

This too is Jonah. He runs, he kicks, he screams. And, he remains in conversation with the Divine. Jonah is right there with Oliver asking, shouting, "What can we do about Gd, who makes and then breaks every god-forsaken, beautiful day?" Jonah shows us our own unwillingness to grow and yet our capability to change, to discover the larger context for our lives.

Speaking of larger context, we then studied the determination of Eve, to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. To become one with the Creator and a Creator of Worlds herself. I shared with you my commitment this 5780 to live in greater balance with the world around us, supporting organizations like Hazon and seeing what and how our BCC community can heed Greta Thornberg's call not for hope but action. I wonder what your commitment to our planet will look like this year?

Oliver's poetry testifies to the the interconnection of adam and adama, of humanity and our earth. She says, *"what we are made of will make something else, which to me is very important. There is no nothingness — with these little atoms that run around too little for us to see. But, put together, they make something. And that to me is a miracle. Where it came from, I don't know. But it's a miracle, and I think it's enough to keep a person afloat."*

Oliver's own facilitation with the world around her, her radical amazement to me is a living embodied of Rabbi A. J. Heschel's call for religious people to do with awe, not simply to have wonder but to do something with it.

Oliver writes about this miracle of no nothingness in her title poem, ***Thirst:***

Another morning and I wake with thirst
for the goodness I do not have. I walk
out to the pond and all the way God has

given us such beautiful lessons. Oh Lord,
I was never a quick scholar but sulked
and hunched over my books past the hour
and the bell; grant me, in your mercy,
a little more time. Love for the earth
and love for you are having such a long
conversation in my heart. Who knows what
will finally happen or where I will be sent,
yet already I have given a great many things
away, expecting to be told to pack nothing,
except the prayers which, with this thirst,
I am slowly learning.

We have been given a great many things. We are here, sent for a purpose. Gd has given us the pond, the lakes, the oceans, our bodies, our voices, our hands. We can no longer be slow to learn that our earth is one life support, our world burning. Love for the earth is not enough we are running out of time. Tomorrow we will wake with a thirst, what will be do next?

Last night we heard from Hannah. Her blasting voice, a shofar call to awaken to our own lives. From Hannah we learn to pray. Oliver testifies in **"Wild Geese,"**

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.

Hannah marches into the Temple at Shilo. She is thought to be drunk as her outpouring to Gd is so overflowing with passion, with challenge with humanity. She tells the world about her despair and she tells it straight. She calls out to Gd and she calls Gd out. Come out. Come out from behind the veil of our skepticism. Come out from behind our doubt, fears and sense of inadequacy. Come out. Come **in** and fill me with creation and creativity, ownership and authorship over my own life. This is what we are here together asking for.

As the day winds on and the gates begin to creak close we face fully our mortality. We sense the interconnection between us in this room, our frailty and our strength.

From Oliver we learn that we are learning.

We know and Oliver writes, "... Everything is mortal. It dies. But its parts don't die. Its parts become something else. We know that when we bury a dog in the garden and with a rose bush on top of it. We know that there is replenishment. And that's pretty amazing. What more there might be, I don't know. But I'm pretty confident of that one."

Tippett asks Oliver a question we might have, "why bother?" "Why try to express in language or in our lives our truth. She says, "Do you think spending your life as a poet and working with words and responding to the world in the way you have as a poet gives you tools to work with? Because putting words around God, or what God is, or who God is, or, I don't know, heaven — **it's always insufficient.**"

Oliver responds, I believe for all of us: **"It's always insufficient, but the question and the wonder is not unsatisfying.** It's never totally satisfying. But it's intriguing. And also what one does end up believing, even if it shifts, has an effect upon life that you live, the life that you choose to live or try to live. So it's an endless, unanswerable quest. I find it endlessly fascinating. And I think also religion is very helpful in people not thinking that they themselves are sufficient, that there is something that has to do with all of us that is more than all of us are."

The Summer Day, she writes:

“Who made the world? / Who made the swan, and the black bear? / Who made the grasshopper? / This grasshopper, I mean — / the one who has flung herself out of the grass, / the one who is eating sugar out of my hand, / who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down — / who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes. / Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face. / Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away. / I don’t know exactly what a prayer is. / I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down / into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, / how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields, / which is what I have been doing all day. / Tell me, what else should I have done? / Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon? / Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?”

Ask we ask ourselves, what will we do with this one wild and precious life, with this one wild and precious year ahead, we know that we are not alone. We are literally surrounded by community, surrounded by teachings, prayers, music, notes that can carry us even when we are weary and lost. We are not alone.

One final poem by Oliver which to me hints at what’s coming next in our calendar, the harvest holiday of Sukkot.

Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does It End?

There are things you can’t reach. But you can reach out to them, and all day long.

The wind, the bird flying away. The idea of God.

And it can keep you as busy as anything else, and happier.

The snake slides away; the fish jumps, like a little lily,
out of the water and back in; the goldfinches sing
from the unreachable top of the tree.

I look; morning to night I am never done with looking.

Looking I mean not just standing around, but standing around
as though with your arms open.

And thinking: maybe something will come, some
shining coil of wind,
or a few leaves from any old tree—
they are all in this too.

And now I will tell you the truth.
Everything in the world
comes.

At least, closer.

And, cordially.

Like the nibbling, tinsel-eyed fish; the unlooping snake.
Like goldfinches, little dolls of gold fluttering around the corner
of the sky

of God, the blue air.

May this be a year of looking; “standing around as though with arms wide open.” A year of reaching towards the “shining coil of wind,” “the nibbling, tinsel-eyed fish, the unlooping snake.” “Like goldfinches, little dolls of gold fluttering around the corner of the sky of Gd, the blue air.”

Like Jonah, may we run this year towards our mission.

Like Eve, may we savor the trees and this year plant new forests.

Like Hannah, may we blast out our shofar-prayer this year for life and creativity.

Like Mary, may we inscribe ourselves and one another not only in the Book of Life, but this year to live lives of of poetry.