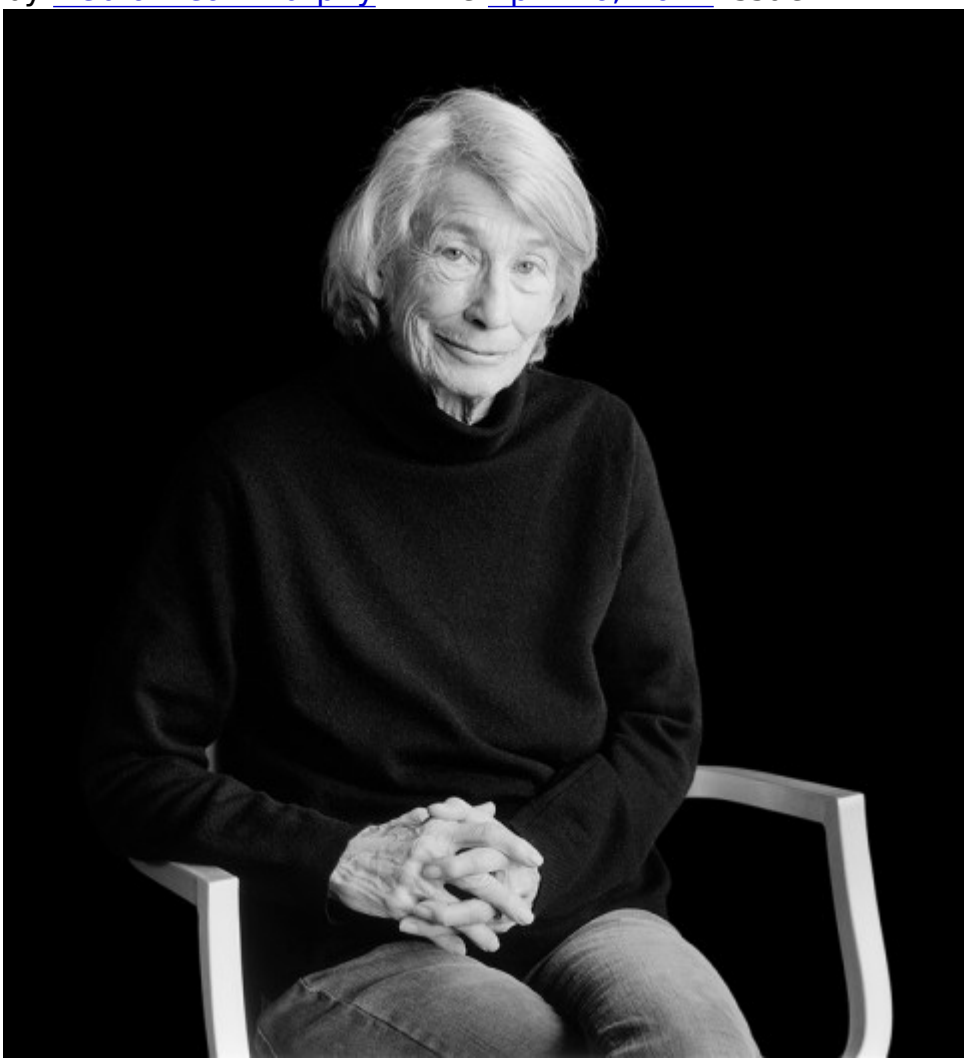
Why we need Mary Oliver’s poems

When arguments fail us, we turn to words of wonder.

by Debra Dean Murphy in the April 26, 2017 issue



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People are hungry for poetry these days. I have found this to be true in my own life, and I experience it among friends and acquaintances whose sensibilities track along the spectrum from deep religious conviction to belief in nothing much at all.

For theology and liturgy, poetry has always mattered. Scripture begins and ends with poetry and contains swaths and snatches of it throughout its vast remainder. The rites of Christian worship across the centuries have endured in part because they are poetry in the mouth, poetry in the ear, poetry to live by. Accomplished poets with theological acumen have always helped to sustain the piety of the faithful: Ephrem the Syrian, Hildegard of Bingen, Dante Alighieri, George Herbert, Christina Rossetti, T. S. Eliot, Gerard Manley Hopkins—to name only a few.

The reasons for the deep draw to poetry are no doubt many, but perhaps in this cultural moment we are discovering a particularly salient one: the failure of arguments. Propositional speech and expository writing have always been limited in their power to move and convince, which is why the best orators and authors throughout history have won over their audiences with poetic speech—language rife with image, metaphor, ambiguity, and lyricism and uninterested in didacticism and moralizing. For Christians who recognize the dreariness of staking one's life solely on a list of propositions to be assented to, poetry turns out to be "like fires for the cold, ropes let down to the lost, something as necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry."

That line was written by Mary Oliver, a poet whose work I have loved, wrestled with, been exasperated by, and returned to again and again for many years. Born in rural Ohio, Oliver lived for many years in Provincetown, Massachusetts, with her partner, the photographer Molly Malone Cook. She chronicled in poetry and prose her time spent in the woods and by the sea, amassing a body of work that has collected numerous accolades, including a National Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize. Oliver's popular success is enviable (unmatched in terms of poetry sales in the American market) and perhaps not unrelated to the dearth of critical studies of her work: accessibility in poetry seems to disincline scholarly engagement.

Oliver is a mystic of the natural world, not a theologian of the church. She doesn't keep company with poets like R. S. Thomas, Geoffrey Hill, or Denise Levertov, and her theological orientation is not that of orthodox Christianity. Nevertheless, Christians have much to gain from reading Oliver—for at least three reasons.

First, her way of regarding the created order can help inform a deeply theological vision of the world. A poem is a kind of dwelling place—intimate and durable—and Oliver constructs poems that invite us to dwell in other habitations more thoughtfully, more honorably, with more integrity and intentionality than we might

otherwise. In this respect, she echoes the summons to stewardship and relationship issued at the beginning of Genesis.

Second, Oliver's poetry witnesses to a deep love of neighbor. She writes mostly about the neighborhoods of forests and fields, ponds and seashores, but some of her most poignant poems are about the work—and the giftedness—of seeking the well-being of others.

Finally, Oliver's relative lack of theological sophistication can be surprisingly compelling. Although many of her recent poems employ a more explicit Christian vocabulary, they do so with a naïveté and wonder that challenge the cynicism of our times. It turns out that accessibility in the poems of Mary Oliver can lead to encounters for the argument-weary that are like fire, like ropes, like necessary bread.

Sometimes the neighbor we are given to love is our own wounded self.

All of Oliver's work assumes an intimacy with the natural world that is in keeping with the kinship of creaturehood described in the opening lines of the Bible. Uninterested in a purported inviolable boundary between humans and the nonhuman world, between observer and the observed, she practices anthropomorphism without embarrassment or guile.

Lines in any number of poems bear this out. She writes of goldfinches "having a melodious argument"; frogs "shouting / their desire, / their satisfaction"; the moth that "has trim, / and feistiness"; the earth which "took me back so tenderly, arranging / her dark skirts, her pockets"; a turtle "filled / with an old blind wish"; and trees that "give off such hints of gladness."

When poets presume to speak *for* the natural world in such ways, it can indicate ignorance or disrespect, however unwitting, and a denial of the otherness, the singular worth of a goldfinch, moth, or majestic honey locust. From a scientific perspective, speaking *for* signals loss of objectivity; from an artistic one it can suggest arrogance. As a result, such speech may be sentimental or mawkish—cliché-ridden shortcuts to unearned emotion, a co-opting of the deer or dogfish in order to indulge a sense of one's own significance.

My hunch in reading Oliver is that she seeks to avoid precisely this mistake and that she embodies instead what theologian Douglas Christie commends of the

contemplative life generally:

> The capacity and willingness to become small, to acknowledge the primacy of the living world, to open oneself completely to the life of the world, and to do so without any aim beyond the simple pleasure of the gesture itself: such unselfconscious simplicity and innocence can become the foundation of a more responsive and reciprocal way of being in the world.

In this respect, Oliver works from the “grammar of animacy”—plant ecologist Robin Wall Kimmerer’s term for linguistic patterns and structures that communicate the moral inclusion of all created matter into human speech, naming the world as “a neighborhood of nonhuman residents.” One can see resonances here with the liturgical poem of Genesis 1 in which all of creation exists in a harmony of relationships that the Creator perceives as beautiful.

In her poem “The Sea” (*American Primitive*), the speaker, while swimming, remembers the primordial existence shared with all living beings that emerged from the ocean’s maternal embrace:

Sprawled
  in that motherlap,
    in that dreamhouse
of salt and exercise,
  what a spillage
    of nostalgia pleads
      from the very bones!

These sensibilities are of a piece with Thomas Berry’s famous precept that the universe consists of a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.

Oliver’s way of giving voice to nonhuman subjects is a way of honoring their otherness, not negating or subsuming it. She isn’t playing at ventriloquism; she doesn’t believe that her beloved dog Percy is really a person in a furry costume. The grammar of animacy recognizes multiple subjectivities, intelligences other than our own, and permits a kind of “speaking through” that does not collapse the nonhuman into the human. Rather, such speech reminds us of the capacity of other beings to be our teachers, holders of knowledge, necessary guides.

The presence of the human neighbor in Oliver's work surfaces in "Singapore" (*House of Light*), where she sets a scene of striking tenderness in, of all places, a public bathroom.

In Singapore, in the airport,
a darkness was ripped from my eyes.
In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open.
A woman knelt there, washing something
    in the white bowl.

Disgust argued in my stomach
and I felt, in my pocket, for my ticket.

Perhaps because Oliver knows that such a poem may catch her reader off-guard, the speaker quickly, playfully shifts the scene:

A poem should always have birds in it.
Kingfishers, say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings.
Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees.
A waterfall, or if that's not possible, a fountain
    rising and falling.
A person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.

But the pull of the dominant action is powerful, and Oliver directs our gaze back to it, even as the poem's speaker is also drawn further into the awkward encounter:

When the woman turned I could not answer her face.
Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together,
and neither could win. . . .

She is washing the tops of the airport ashtrays, as big as
    hubcaps, with a blue rag.
Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing.
She does not work slowly, nor quickly, like a river.
Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.

The river and the kingfisher insist themselves again but only so we might stay fixed on this silent working woman, her features, and her appointed task. Not on the dunes of Cape Cod but in a public restroom in Southeast Asia the speaker in Oliver's

poem finds, to her own unease and amazement, a neighbor to love. The poem concludes:

Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only
the light that can shine out of a life. I mean
the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth,
the way her smile was only for my sake; I mean
the way this poem is filled with trees, and birds.

In other poems, Oliver reminds us that sometimes the neighbor we are given to love is our own wounded self. Sexually abused as a child by her father, Oliver conveys the damage inflicted by this violence in a handful of poems. From “Rage” (*Dream Work*):

But you were also the red song
in the night,
stumbling through the house
to the child’s bed,
to the damp rose of her body,
leaving your bitter taste.

In “The Journey” (*Dream Work*), she gives voice to how tending to such wounds can be an act of love and generosity to oneself—even if only falteringly, in ways that never fully erase the self-doubt and guilt of leaving other vulnerable ones behind:

. . . though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles . . .

. . . you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do—
determined to save
the only life you could save.

In a brief bit of prose from her book *Blue Pastures*, Oliver recalls how her father took her ice skating when she was a small child and “then forgot me, and went home.”

Hours later when he returns for her, now in the care of a neighbor,

> never had I seen so handsome a man; he talked, he laughed, his movements were smooth and easy, his blue eyes were clear. He had simply, he said, forgotten that I existed . . . It lay on him, that freedom, like an aura. Then I put on my coat, and we got into the car, and he sat back in the awful prison of himself, the old veils covered his eyes, and he did not say another word.

In a poem called “Ice” (*New and Selected Poems, Volume One*) Oliver writes about her father in old age, how he “spent his last winter / Making ice-grips for shoes.” The speaker recounts his obsessive work “in the drafty workshop” where “he would not be stopped.”

He wrapped and mailed
A dozen pairs to me, in the easy snows

Of Massachusetts, and a dozen
To my sister, in California.

Later we learned how he’d given them away
To the neighbors, an old man

Appearing with cold blue cheeks at every door.
No one refused him.

For plainly the giving was an asking,
A petition to be welcomed and useful . . .

The poet offers no tidy reconciliation between daughter and father. In just these two brief glimpses it is evident that the poet sees the man—comes to know him in both his cruelty and vulnerability as only time and distance allow. And this, too, is a form of neighbor love: seeing and knowing another, not to fix anything or anyone but to regard the other truthfully, to grant all the complications of personhood even when fullness of relationship can never be restored.

In 2005 Oliver’s lifelong partner died of cancer. A year later she published *Thirst*, a collection of poems that grapples with grief and reveals Oliver’s curiosity about and increasing comfort with the language of faith and the rituals and rhythms of

liturgical practice. Several of the poems are written as prayers, often with a kind of convert's zeal but also in the way of the Psalms:

Lord God, mercy is in your hands, pour
me a little. And tenderness too. My
need is great . . .

. . . When I first found you I was
filled with light, now the darkness grows
and it is filled with crooked things, bitter
and weak, each one bearing my name.

She also writes about

. . . trying to find the lesson
for tomorrow. Matthew something.
Which lectionary? I have not
forgotten the Way, but, a little,
the way to the Way.

She admits to awkwardness, but not to indifference, during the liturgy:

In the household of God, I have stumbled in recitation,
    And in my mind I have wandered.
I have interrupted worship with discussion.
Once I extinguished the Gospel candle after all the
    others.
But never held the cup to my mouth lagging in gratitude.

There is almost always in Oliver a juxtaposition of what she calls "institutional grace" and the glory of the natural world. In a poem called "The Vast Ocean Begins Just Outside Our Church: The Eucharist," the speaker's experience of Christ's real presence in the bread and wine gives new insight into her longing to see Jesus "on the shore, / just walking, / beautiful man."

Many of these poems display both an innocence and an intensity that doesn't always work—a childish, sometimes self-congratulatory bemusement that taxes the reader's patience and goodwill. But when Oliver gets it right—when she allows her inquisitiveness and her delight to direct attention away from herself—she sheds

fresh insight on familiar stories, new wisdom on well-worn pieties.

In “Gethsemane,” she notes (following scripture) that “the disciples slept.” But because she brings to this story sensibilities borne of decades of intimate observance of the living, humming, buzzing, brimming, breathing natural world, she can also wonder:

Jesus said, wait with me. And maybe the stars did,
    maybe
the wind wound itself into a silver tree, and didn’t move,
   maybe
the lake far away, where once he walked as on a
   blue pavement,
lay still and waited, wild awake.

Human frailty and failure are almost always the centerpiece of preaching and teaching about this passage. Oliver, with her characteristic anthropomorphism, suggests that such anthropo*centrism* is a skewing of the story. If the gospel is a narrative of cosmic dimensions, she is onto something.

In “Praying,” the speaker imbues ancient wisdom about the simplicity of prayer and the primacy of gratitude and silence with gentle encouragement and moving images taken not from the strivings of the interior life but from engagement with the natural world. The speaker makes no presumption of having mastered prayer, offering only a modest catalog of suggestions, as if she knows she needs to follow her own advice:

. . . 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.

Although Oliver may have begun to treat theological themes more frequently and to use Christian language more explicitly, she remains true to what her work has

always been about: pointing readers to the gift of presence—reminding us, in poems that are often deceptively simple, of what it means to attend to what is before us in any given moment. This is also the gift of wonder, of a posture of receptivity that Christians sometimes speak of as part of our vocation—the calling to live more fully into our humanity as persons bearing the *imago dei*, to mirror the divine dance of mutual presence, mutual receptivity, mutual love. Oliver's poems are not religious in a classic sense, but they do have designs on their readers. They are occasions for transfiguring the imagination and a summons to wonder and delight.

A theology of wonder cannot ignore nature's destructive side or the catastrophic damage humans have caused and continue to cause to ecosystems and whole populations. Oliver does not address these realities directly in her poetry, and some wonder why not. Who better to sound the alarm about impending ecological doom than this widely read poet-naturalist-lover of the world who has immersed and invested herself in soil, seashore, forest, and wetland her whole life?

It is a reasonable question, but one which I think Oliver answers in the way that an artist must. The worst kind of poetry is preachy and argumentative. Oliver invites the reader into wonder, into the harvest of presence, so that in forgetting ourselves for a moment and attending, say, to the "trim and feistiness" of a single green moth, we might possibly (there are no guarantees, such is the risk art takes) be initiated into a practice, a form of wisdom, a way of life, whereby in time we might come to care passionately, purposefully, about more of our neighbors, human and nonhuman, with whom we share this one world.

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