

Body Love
“Wild Geese” by Mary Oliver
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First Central Congregational Church
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Today we conclude our series based on the poems of Mary Oliver, who died in January. And we are concluding with one of her most popular poems, “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.

Krista Tippett, the host of the radio show *On Being*, described this poem “Wild Geese” as “a poem that has saved lives.” What does she mean?

I found one example online written by a biochemist named Brandon Taylor as he described the effect of the poem upon him:

For a long time, I felt unworthy of the world. For great periods of my life, I still feel unworthy of the world. This is not an uncommon state. Worthiness is the chief subject of the poem, to me. The speaker, in an act of breathtaking generosity, offers the reader, no matter how lowly or afield they have found themselves, an opportunity to reenter the world. There is an entreaty to follow the natural grain of one’s character, to heed one’s desire. There is no need to repent, to apologize, to make amends for how one is. . . . The source of all of this acceptance and love is in the beauty of the world as it is. The

rain. The geese in their flight. And at the end, one is offered a place, not in the world of people, but in the kingdom of things, a haunting reminder of the scope and presence of nature.

I feel worthy of being in the world when I think of “Wild Geese.” I feel that the world has use for me, that there is a place for me in the world that is vaster and greater and eternal.

And so this poem is quite popular; it comforts and inspires people. But there is more to it than one might realize on a first read.

Shortly after Mary Oliver’s death, Jeanna Kadlec wrote a piece for Lit Hub pointing out the power of Mary Oliver as a queer poet and particularly the queer perspective in this popular poem “Wild Geese,” a perspective often missed by readers. Kadlec wrote:

“Wild Geese” is distinctly, uniquely queer. In the poem, the speaker gives the reader permission to inhabit their body: to be present in it, to know and own what they want without shame. Harder to do than it sounds, as any queer can tell you.

Kadlec wrote about growing up an Evangelical who later in life had to learn that she could desire within her own body. Since I grew up a Southern Baptist gay kid, I can identify with that statement.

Kadlec wrote, “‘Wild Geese,’ and so many other poems, are about allowing ourselves the permission to be fully present in our bodies and their incumbent desires.” She then drew this connection to queer life:

This world, still, would diminish and constrain and limit and imprison and even kill gay and lesbian and trans and bisexual and queer people, simply for occupying our bodies in a way as honest as the otters and birds that Oliver observed on her walks through the woods and beaches of Provincetown. *Don’t be afraid of its plenty, she says of love. Joy is not made to be a crumb.* [sic]

What a delight that America’s most beloved and best-selling poet of recent decades, a writer widely embraced for her spirituality, who was described as the favorite poet of Christian ministers, was in fact a lesbian. And a lesbian who wrote with erotic passion about her lover. Such as this excerpt from “The Gardens,”

How
shall I touch you
unless it is
everywhere?
I begin
here and there,
finding you,

the heart within you,
and the animal,
and the voice.

In the late 1950's Mary Oliver was staying at Steepletop, the home of Edna St. Vincent Millay, which drew writers and artists, when one day she walked into the kitchen and saw the photographer Molly Malone Cook sitting at the table. Oliver described the moment, "I took one look and fell, hook and tumble."

Oliver and Cook were together for more than forty years. They lived much of that time in Provincetown, Massachusetts, known as a gay mecca. They ran a bookshop together there and each pursued her art. Oliver learned much from Cook that affected her poetry. She wrote, "M. instilled in me this deeper level of looking and working, of seeing through the heavenly visibles to the heavenly invisibles."

When Cook died of cancer in 2005 at the age of eighty, Oliver produced a book entitled *Our World* which combined Cook's photographs with Oliver's writing. A true testament of love and devotion. In that book, Oliver wrote of the surprising ways one can spend a lifetime with someone and still not fully know them. This is best expressed in the poem "The Whistler."

All of a sudden she began to whistle. By all of a sudden
I mean that for more than thirty years she had not
whistled. It was thrilling. At first I wondered, who was
in the house, what stranger? I was upstairs reading, and
she was downstairs. As from the throat of a wild and
cheerful bird, not caught but visiting, the sounds war-
bled and slid and doubled back and larked and soared.

Finally I said, Is that you? Is that you whistling? Yes, she
said. I used to whistle, a long time ago. Now I see I can
still whistle. And cadence after cadence she strolled
through the house, whistling.

I know her so well, I think. I thought. Elbow and ankle-
Mood and desire. Anguish and frolic. Anger too.
And the devotions. And for all that, do we even begin
to know each other? Who is this I've been living with
for thirty years?

This clear, dark, lovely whistler?

Jeanna Kadlec points out that Oliver is best known as a nature poet, but she also wrote about what it means to "love and learn one woman for nearly half a century." What it means to pay attention not just to birds and rivers but to the body one loves. Kadlec continues, "There is a consistent affirmation in Oliver's poetry that we are worthy of our lover's time, effort,

gratitude. This is the queer erotic: the validation of our bodies as worthy of attention, of desire, of sex.”

Consider these lines from the poem “The Plum Trees,”

There’s nothing
so sensible as sensual inundation. Joy
is a taste before
it’s anything else, and the body

can lounge for hours devouring
the important moments. Listen,

the only way
to tempt happiness into your mind is by taking it

into the body first, like small
wild plums.

According to Kadlec,

Oliver’s eroticism is more visible to the queer reader, who knows that queerness isn’t just about queer sex: it is a fundamentally individual way of looking at the world. To queer is to break down—to destroy—the structures that would limit or bar or imprison us, and to rethink or even replace them.

Of course this June was the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion, a key turning point in the struggle for LGBTQ civil rights. I was away on vacation that weekend, camping out with my husband and son. Michael and I had some melancholy that we weren’t at one of the big gay pride festivals or parades occurring all over the country. But we also felt a sense of liberated accomplishment that here we were, a queer family, living our lives. Surely that was its own celebration of what Stonewall and the gay pride movement have meant.

Christianity has long been responsible for the oppression of sexual and gender minorities. This resulted from some deep theological mistakes. Christian theology has often struggled with embracing the human body, sexuality, and desire. This is a legacy of St. Augustine and other early thinkers.

But history didn’t have to be that way. One of our core teachings is that God inhabited a human body, becoming fully flesh and experiencing all that it means to be human, and thereby transfiguring human bodies into divine bodies. These teachings are the more ancient heritage of Christianity. And in recent decades, sometimes led by queer scholars and theologians, the church has reawakened to its own ideas and has come to more fully embrace desire, sexuality, and the body.

And so we hold Mary Oliver as an example. A queer religious poet who taught us that we love God by loving what God has created. That includes rivers, whales, plums, and geese. And also bodies. Our own bodies and the bodies of those we love. We can in fact draw closer to God by desiring and loving each other.

That remains a healing, liberating, life-saving message. A good news for us, as God's people, to proclaim.

Let me conclude with one elegy I saw posted by an ordinary fan on Facebook. It said, "Mary Oliver a quiet pioneer, a queer icon, a brave poet, and a beautiful human. Thank you for everything you gave to us." Amen.