

I Listened

“At the River Clarion” by Mary Oliver

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Last week I spent beside a river. The North Loup River, to be exact. I was at Kamp Kaleo, our United Church of Christ campground here in Nebraska, for Faith and Fine Arts Camp. I was teaching the writing group.

The first morning, I was awake early and so I wandered down to a bench beside the river and watched the sunrise play off the fast flowing water. The river was high, from all the spring and summer rains. All the sandbars were covered and the banks were not exposed. The river was rushing by on its journey through the Sandhills.

Later in the week we tubed on the river, always a joyful experience. The high point was either shooting some mild rapids, when I squealed with childish glee, or when we rounded a bend and there was a big, red, Angus bull standing in the river. We all promptly paddled our tubes to the other side. Fortunately, the bull seemed confused but not alarmed at the loud tubers floating by.

Back in June I also spent some time beside another river. Our family camped at Pike’s Peak State Park in northeastern Iowa. Yes, there is another Pike’s Peak than the tall mountain in Colorado. Apparently explorer Zebulon Pike enjoyed naming places after himself.

This Pike’s Peak is a tall hill along the Mississippi River that overlooks the confluence with the Wisconsin River. Our first night we walked to the overlook and were stunned by the natural beauty—the rich green forested hillsides, the many islands dotting the river at that point, the sunlight on the water. Over the next four days I walked to that overlook two or three times a day and every single time the view and the river were different—the light changed, the colors were shifted--sometimes dominated by blue and another time by pink—and then the final morning a thick fog blocked any view of the river below. Standing at the overlook I felt as if I was in the Caspar David Friederich painting *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog*.

According to Lauren Krauze, “[Mary] Oliver’s work often invites readers—by way of her own example—to gaze upon their grief, despair, and loneliness.”

Krauze continues, “but she does not belabor those aspects. Instead, her words encourage readers to turn toward something larger. This shift in focus from an intimate, personal experience to the interconnected movements of the wider world appears throughout her work as an element that seems both elemental and mystical.”

That occurs here in the poem “At the River Clarion.” Oliver, sometime after the death of her wife and more immediately to this poem, the death of her dog Luke, sits on a rock in the river in order to grieve and in her grief she listens to the river so that she might learn from it. “We do not live in a simple world,” she writes.

Death and suffering and pain grieve and afflict us. Mary Oliver is right to teach us both to gaze at these realities and then also how to live with them.

Consider these lines from "I Go Down to the Shore,"

I go down to the shore in the morning
and depending on the hour the waves
are rolling in or moving out,
and I say, oh, I am miserable,
what shall--
what should I do? And the sea says
in its lovely voice:
Excuse me, I have work to do.

Or these lines from the poem "Flare,"

Nothing lasts.
There is a graveyard where everything I am talking about is,
now.

I stood there once, on the green grass, scattering flowers.

The poem "Flare," from which these lines come, is partly about her parents. She grew up in a "dark and broken" home where her father abused her. She writes of her father as "a demon of frustrated dreams" and "a breaker of trust." She writes of her anger, her refusal to carry her parents' baggage forward, of crying out with the voice of child in misery, disappointment, and terror.

And yet, she closes the poem,

When loneliness comes stalking, go into the fields, consider
the orderliness of the world. Notice
something you have never noticed before . . .

Let grief be your sister, she will whether or no.
Rise up from the stump of sorrow, and be green also,
like the diligent leaves. . . .

Scatter your flowers over the graves, and walk away.

How could she do this? How did she survive her trauma, find healing and wholeness, and become an inspiration for others. In a profile from *The New Yorker*, Ruth Franklin writes, "Walking the woods, with Whitman in her knapsack, was her escape from an unhappy home life."

She learned to pay attention to nature, to listen. In the poem “At the River Clarion” she wrote, “all afternoon I listened to the voices of the river talking.” In “I Go down to the Shore” the sea speaks to her grief. Throughout her poetry she hears the creatures of the natural world speaking to her and she learns from them.

In the poem “Hearing of Your Illness” about her fellow poet James Wright, she writes of lying down in a field near a “black creek and alder grove” and talking to them about his illness and coming death. She writes,

I felt better, telling them about you.
They know what pain is, and they know you,
And they would have stopped too, as I
was longing to do, everything, the hunger
and the flowing.

That they could not--
merely loved you and waited
to take you back . . .
was what I learned there, so I

got up finally, with a grief
worthy of you, and went home.

Debra Dean Murphy writes that this intimacy with the created world is “in keeping with the kinship of creaturehood described in the opening lines of the Bible.” And she quotes theologian Douglas Christie on the contemplative life:

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.

One of the oldest of human questions is “Where is God when we suffer?” Mary Oliver is not a philosopher or theologian; she develops no robust theodicy, no logical defense of the goodness of God in the face of human suffering. No, she is a mystic, who provides no final or sufficient answer to this question; “I don’t know who God is exactly,” she writes.

Instead she speaks to us by her example. She models a type of life that gazes at our suffering and yet finds a measure of healing by listening to the natural world. For by listening, she encounters God.

Jason Oliver wrote in the review *America*, that Mary Oliver is a type of panentheist, which he characterizes as “her ability to see God in all things and all things in God. In a spider under a stairwell and a favorite pond, the flowers along the beach . . . , a cleaning woman in an airport bathroom and a young man with a gift for constructing with lumber but not with

language, Oliver sought and saw revelation. It is this quality that gives her work the luster of the eternal.”

In “At the River Clarion” she encounters God in everything—in the river, in butter, the lilly, the forest, the leaf of grass, but also the ghetto, the dying ice caps, the hands of those desperately preparing their weapons, and the tick that killed her beloved dog Luke. She writes,

Yes, it could be that I am a tiny piece of God, and
each of you too, or at least
of his intention and his hope.
Which is a delight beyond measure.

For her, consolation arrives in discovering God all around us.

Mary Oliver teaches us—in the midst of our grief, if we but listen, we can hear God speaking to us. And so the poem ends,

And still, pressed deep into my mind, the river
keeps coming, touching me, passing by on its
long journey, its pale, infallible voice
singing.

So, find your river this week. Find your place to sit and listen. For only if you listen, can you hear God speaking.