

Pay Attention

“The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver
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On January 17 of this year, Mary Oliver, America’s most beloved poet, died. Oliver was not only the nation’s most popular poet, she was also a deeply spiritual writer. Her collected works, for instance, is entitled *Devotions*.

And so last winter Katie and I decided that in Oliver’s memory, we wanted to spend a month of worship focused on her poetry and the spiritual and theological ideas it conveys. We launch that series today, with this, one of Oliver’s most popular poems, “The Summer Day.”

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?

In a 2017 article in *The Christian Century* entitled “Why we need Mary Oliver’s poems,” Debra Dean Murphy wrote, “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.”

For example, here’s a segment of a poem entitled “Humpbacks” about whale watching off the coast of Cape Cod.

We wait, not knowing
just where it will happen; suddenly
they smash through the surface, someone begins
shouting for joy and you realize
it is yourself as they surge
upward and you see for the first time
how huge they are, as they breach,
and dive, and breach again
through the shining blue flowers
of the split water and you see them
for some unbelievable
part of a moment against the sky--
like nothing you've ever imagined--
like the myth of the fifth morning galloping
out of darkness, pouring
heavenward, spinning

Yes, Oliver's poems are a summons to wonder and delight, and there is a deep theological connection to this idea. As Debra Dean Murphy points out, "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 [image of God], to mirror the divine dance of mutual presence, mutual receptivity, mutual love."

The summons to wonder and delight is a summons to be more fully human, to be more like God, to fulfill our calling.

Which is why I paired today's poem with the eighth psalm, that lyric to the glories of humankind. The God who created all things has made even us, with mindful attention and care. We are crowned with glory and honor and given power and dominion. God desires that we flourish.

A key theme in my own theology and in my preaching is this idea of living our best lives. It is contained in the ancient Christian idea that "the glory of God is a humanity fully alive," and the reformed idea that the chief end of humanity is "to glorify God and enjoy God forever," and the claim about the resurrection that we Christians "are the eternal beginners."

But in the last couple of years I've been reading more about trauma and resilience. One of the things so many writers in trauma studies tell us is that the traumatized person continues to carry their wounds with them. That some possibilities at human flourishing are forever cut off.

Maybe Mary Oliver helps us to connect these two disparate themes. For all the inspirational quotes drawn from her writings, they acknowledge darkness. The dangers and violence of the natural world. And the great harms inflicted by human beings. As a child she was sexually abused by her father. In 2005 her spouse of over forty years, Molly Malone Cook, died of cancer. Pain and suffering are themes of Oliver's poetry. Consider, "The Fish."

The first fish
I ever caught
would not lie down
quiet in the pail
but flailed and sucked
at the burning
amazement of the air
and died
in the slow pouring off
of rainbows. Later
I opened his body and separated
the flesh from the bones
and ate him. Now the sea
is in me: I am the fish, the fish
glitters in me; we are
risen, tangled together, certain to fall
back to the sea. Out of pain,
and pain, and more pain,
we feed this feverish plot, we are nourished
by the mystery.

So, how does a woman who experienced pain and trauma end up writing inspirational poetry that summons us to wonder and delight?

By teaching us to pay attention.

The primary spiritual and human practice revealed in Mary Oliver's writing is to "pay attention." For instance, it's there explicitly in the final line of her essay "Upstream" — "Attention is the beginning of devotion."

Debra Dean Murphy writes that Oliver's poems point "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." She teaches us to attend to our natural world and the myriad creatures and happenings around us. She also teaches us to attend to our own inner states, our physical bodies, and the body of our beloved. We cannot begin to wonder at or to love that which we have not noticed, carefully.

We notice this in the poem "The Summer Day" when she draws our attention not to grasshoppers in general but to a particular grasshopper, the one in her hand. She can speak with affection for it because she has taken the time to attend to it.

Which makes her a powerful poet of our time, when we can be so easily distracted. Franklin Foer wrote about this in *The Atlantic* after Mary Oliver's death.

In the age of surveillance capitalism, the biggest corporations redirect the gaze, exploiting the psyche's vulnerabilities for profit. Even silenced phones light up with

notifications that break eye contact and disrupt concentration. YouTube plays videos in an endless loop, queued on the basis of intimate data, so that the emotional rush of one clip stokes the desire to watch the next. Facebook, the ultimate manipulation machine, arrays information to exploit the psychic weaknesses of users, with the intent of keeping them on its site for as long as it can. The hand touches the phone upon waking, even before it can rub the eye or reach across the bed to wake the spouse.

He pointed out that Oliver herself was not directly criticizing these developments, but her writings teach us to live differently.

What are we going to do with our “one wild and precious life?”

Will we be distracted? Will we fail to enjoy the world God created? Will we miss a chance to love and be loved?

Or will we heed the “summons to wonder and delight” by attending to what is before us at any given moment? And thereby fulfill our call “to live more fully into our humanity as persons bearing the [image of God]?”