

**“To Pay Attention”
Sunday, September 13, 2020**

Welcome & Chalice Lighting – Rev. Betsy Mead Tabor

Welcome. Here we seek justice and truth and understanding.
Here we celebrate life and contemplate mystery.
Here we seek healing and wholeness. Welcome, all.

The air has turned crisp and clear. We mark the change of season with the imagery of the late Mary Oliver, whose birthday was last week. Mary Oliver lived simply on the Cape with her partner of 40 years, photographer Molly Malone Cook, and, over the years, several beloved dogs. She observed life closely: “...How important it is [she wrote] to walk along, not in haste but slowly,/looking at everything...To pay attention, *this* is our endless/and proper work.”¹ She found inspiration in the backyard, the woods, and at the beach.

Mary Oliver believed that poetry “*wishes* for a community...is a community ritual.”² Her poems appear so often in UU pulpits, one obit said that “her best lines... have begun to sound like common prayer.”³ And so our community ritual today is to listen to four poems and pay attention to what we sometimes ignore (beauty, joy) and what we sometimes avoid (despair, death).

Twelve people will read today. Thank you, all. As we do every Tuesday afternoon, we will listen to each poem three times. Each time a different voice. Pay attention to what lands, to images that stand out, words you don’t know, and parts you’re glad to hear again, like old friends. Your voice is invited, too. After the third reading, we’ll ponder a question during the music that follows, then share our responses.

Mary Oliver invited us into mystery and wonder. In that spirit, we light our chalices.

Centering “Songs My Mother Taught Me” by Antonin Dvorak

Performed by Betsy Ginsberg and friends

Shared Affirmation

Hymn “For the Earth Forever Turning”

Poem I Mary Oliver had a gift for capturing the essence of a season, as she did in one of her best known poems, inspired by the call of the geese.

Readers: Sandra Carr, David Wilkins, Barbara Bald

¹ Mary Oliver. “Yes! No!”

² Rachel Syme. “Mary Oliver Helped Us Stay Amazed.” *The New Yorker*. 19 January 2019.

³ Ibid.

"Wild Geese"

By Mary Oliver

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.

Music

Chopin Prelude #23

Played by Eve Goss

Community Response: "How did you feel at the end of "The Wild Geese"?"

Sandra C: Safe, connected.

David W: Accepted.

Barbara B: Accepted, that I have a place.

10:15:30 From marsha c : Open

10:15:42 From Betsy L : At peace

10:15:47 From rod f: tranquility

10:15:51 From meredithm : Alive

10:15:57 From Sandra C: Safe...connected

10:16:02 From Karen McC : belonging

10:16:05 From Margaret R: Despite how I feel sometimes, I belong.

10:16:06 From Cindy E : Accepted

10:16:06 From Sam P : amid a flock

10:16:19 From Kim H : a sense of peace.....and belonging to the greater world

10:16:24 From Karen McC : a part of biodiversity

A Time for All Ages Alice Posner

Poem II These are whelks. They've been through a lot, their edges soft and worn. This poem gives voice to what *we* go through.

Readers: Hope Hutchinson, Jorge Dominguez, Marion Posner

“Whelks”

By Mary Oliver

Here are the perfect
fans of the scallops,
quahogs, and weedy mussels
still holding their orange fruit –
and here are the whelks –
whirlwinds,
each the size of a fist,
but always cracked and broken –
clearly they have been travelling
under the sky-blue waves
for a long time.
All my life
I have been restless –
I have felt there is something
more wonderful than gloss –
than wholeness –
than staying at home.
I have not been sure what it is.
But every morning on the wide shore
I pass what is perfect and shining
to look for the whelks, whose edges
have rubbed so long against the world
they have snapped and crumbled –
they have almost vanished,
with the last relinquishing
of their unrepeatable energy,
back into everything else.
When I find one
I hold it in my hand,
I look out over that shanking fire,
I shut my eyes. Not often,
but now and again there’s a moment
when the heart cries aloud:
yes, I am willing to be
that wild darkness,
that long, blue body of light.

Music

“Rocks of Brae” Scottish harp melody

Played by Shana

Community Response: “What is ‘Whelks’ about?”

Hope H: For me, this poem is about change, courage, facing the new and unknown.

Jorge D: It generates in me a feeling of resilience – resilience in the restlessness to continue to explore.

Marion P: This poem says to me, “Open your hand and hold.”

10:30:00 From Cindy E : Endurance
 10:30:01 From eleanorj : Strength in vulnerability
 10:30:04 From David W : This is a difficult poem
 10:30:12 From Barbara L : eternal restlessness
 10:30:19 From rod f: indeterminacy
 10:30:29 From meredithm : seeds
 10:30:31 From Sandra C: survival in hard times
 10:30:42 From Karen McC : the beauty of experience
 10:30:49 From Margaret R: I can let go for the wild ride
 10:30:58 From Kim H : be brave....jump into action not worrying about
 perfection.....something I have to work on for sure
 10:31:19 From Donna San A: Universal reality of suffering
 10:31:20 From marsha c : I have no fear
 10:31:27 From Pamela A : Take courage, be resilient
 10:31:29 From Amanda H : the saying "there is beauty in the breakdown"
 10:31:39 From Sam P : perseverance and endurance
 10:31:39 From Barbara B : Reminds me of how our sharp edges and those of sea glass are
 smoothed over time and sometimes hardship
 10:31:46 From Lynn H : Be with it

Joys & Concerns 18c Irish melody Recording by Shana and Madeline MacNeil

“Spirit of Life”

Meditation

We give thanks for another summer gone by:
 blossom, water, sky, infinite textures and shades of green

We give thanks for another six months gone by:
 Like no other – intense, daunting, thought-provoking.

We ache as fire terrifies...and destroys life on the west coast.
 We ache as the virus continues its course.
 We ache as people hurt each other. As we hurt each other.
 We ache for our broken world.

May we forgive each other - speak gently - react generously.
 May we grow in understanding
 and see the blessings of the journey.

May Love guide us.
 May we look back and remember those who have loved us
 May we look around to love in our lives right now
 My we dare love and love and love.
 So may it be.
 [Respond to Joys & Concerns.]

Poem III Why Mary Oliver in worship? Because she wrote about prayer and salvation and what it means to live and die. At the same time, she didn't put too fine a point on her beliefs – she respected ours. “I wouldn't persuade you from whatever you believe...That's your business.” But when a wren begins to sing, “positively drenched in enthusiasm,” she says, “...what could this be/if it isn't a prayer?”⁴

And what is death? When the white owl silently swoops down onto the snowy field and catches its supper: “...maybe death isn't darkness, after all,/but so much light wrapping itself around us – as soft as feathers....”⁵

And so the poem “What Is There Beyond Knowing?”

Readers: Peggy Polo, Rod Forsman, Diane Shank

“What Is There Beyond Knowing?”

By Mary Oliver

What is there beyond knowing that keeps
calling to me? I can't

turn in any direction
but it's there. I don't mean

the leaves' grip and shine or even the thrush's
silk song, but the far-off

fires, for example,
of the stars, heaven's slowly turning

theater of light, or the wind
playful with its breath;

or time that's always rushing forward,
or standing still

in the same -- what shall I say --
moment.

What I know
I could put into a pack

as if it were bread and cheese, and carry it
on one shoulder,

⁴ Mary Oliver. “I Happened to be Standing.”

⁵ Mary Oliver. “White Owl Flies Into and Out of the Field.”

important and honorable, but so small!
While everything else continues, unexplained

and unexplainable. How wonderful it is
to follow a thought quietly

to its logical end.
I have done this a few times.

But mostly I just stand in the dark field,
in the middle of the world, breathing

in and out. Life so far doesn't have any other name
but breath and light, wind and rain.

If there's a temple, I haven't found it yet.
I simply go on drifting, in the heaven of the grass
and the weeds.

Music "Sweet Hour of Prayer" Played by Shana

Special Collection We have a special Morning Offering today as we return to taking up a collection each month for an organization whose work aligns with our UU values. Today's Special Collection will go to NH Legal Assistance. Sarah Palermo will tell us about this work.

All online donations today will be earmarked for NHLA unless otherwise noted. Thank you for giving generously.

Note: If giving by mail, make check payable to NH Campaign for Legal Services and send to:
NH Legal Assistance
Attn: NH Campaign for Legal Services
117 North State Street
Concord, NH 03301

Anthem "I Am That Great and Fiery Force" (UU hymn)

Poem IV Some Mary Oliver poems burst with joy. Goldfinches sing "just to be alive on this fresh morning...."⁶

"Every day I hear or see something that kills me with delight...."⁷

And of course, "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"⁸

⁶ Mary Oliver. "Invitation."

⁷ Mary Oliver. "Mindful."

⁸ Mary Oliver. "The Summer Day."

Our fourth selection is a prose poem about joy.

Readers: Amanda Harris, Sam Perry, Margaret Rieser

“Don’t Hesitate”

By Mary Oliver

If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don’t hesitate. Give in to it. There are plenty of lives and whole towns destroyed or about to be. We are not wise, and not very often kind. And much can never be redeemed. Still, life has some possibility left. Perhaps this is its way of fighting back, that sometimes something happens better than all the riches or power in the world. It could be anything, but very likely you notice it in the instant when love begins. Anyway, that’s often the case. Anyway, whatever it is, don’t be afraid of its plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb.

Music “Ode to Joy” by Ludwig von Beethoven

Played by Shana

Community Response: “What unexpected joy arises in you?”

Amanda H : The poem brought to mind the joy I feel when I ride a bike.

Sam P: The joy that comes to my spirit is dancing in a mountain meadow.

Margaret R: The joy that arises for me is watching a committee of seven ravens hold a meeting around my compost pile.

11:10:37 From Sam P : birds congregating, as we, too

11:10:50 From David W : While Sam read, the EAGLE flew right by in front of our house!

11:10:54 From Moria M: I think this is “ode to joy” :)

11:10:55 From Kim H : a loon appears right in front of my kayak! Added joy: they call

11:11:01 From Margaret R: Watching a young hawk learn to hunt.

11:11:10 From Betsy L : My puppy willing to cuddle through this whole service!

11:11:25 From eleanorj : The richness of this service.

11:11:25 From Donna San A : At this very moment, watching Shana play “Ode to Joy”!

11:11:26 From Margaret R: Oh, Betsy! What joy!

11:11:37 From rod f: a kentucky warbler heading back south, leaving me with its song

11:11:47 From Pamela A : the tiny beech leaves dancing, shimmering over this wild wilderness lake I'm blessed to be watching right now.

11:11:48 From Mary & Jorge D: Joy to listen to "Ode to Joy," which is also the anthem of the European Union.

11:11:49 From Sam P : eternity

11:12:20 From hopeful h: biking down East Shore Drive and spotting a mama bear with three cubs crossing the road ahead.

11:12:26 From marsha c : Sun breaking though on a cloudy morning.

11:12:38 From Deborah G: Listening to the leaves blowing in the wind

11:12:39 From Phil M: A fresh doughnut and fresh cup of coffee

11:13:14 From Margaret R: I've seen that same mama, Hope, crossing Ossipee Lake Road.

Closing Words

Mary Oliver honored our questions. Is there a place for me? Am I enough? “Do you adore the green grass, with its terror beneath?”⁹

Stephanie Burt of *The New Yorker* said it just right. She gave us tools: “tools to fight gloom, to open the front door, to lead wilder or more precious lives.”¹⁰

Hymn “We Laugh, We Cry”

Chalice Extinguishing

Reminders

- Outdoor service next week 9/20 (9/27 rain date). All welcome. Water Communion.
- Black Lives Matter banner
- Coffee Hour

Benediction

Our benediction comes from Rachel Syme of *The New Yorker*:

“...[Mary] Oliver gave voice to the process of confronting one’s dark places, of peering underneath toadstools and into stagnant ponds. And, when she looked there, she found forgiveness. She found grace. She found that she was allowed to love the world.”¹¹

May faith in Love guide us. See you soon.

Postlude “Simple Gifts”

This service can be viewed until December 13, 2020 at:

<https://uuma.zoom.us/rec/share/OeEmdu18EZTx78I3VFjob8ZRc4TMLftsEmZbzmRiv-Aii4me9HtdwQbgBXIkMQbR.Df0QcvjWnuU4ICFS>

Access Passcode: Pn1t\$@GQ

⁹ Mary Oliver. “Peonies.”

¹⁰ Stephanie Burt, “Mary Oliver’s Deep, Direct Love for the World.” *The New Yorker*. 18 January 2019.

¹¹ Syme, *Ibid*.