

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

February 4, 2019

A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



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.

Mary Oliver¹

☞ Reflections

Wellspring has recently featured Mary Oliver (her poem “White Owl Flies Into and Out of the Field” appears in the November 19 edition), but her recent death has inspired such an outpouring of adoration and sadness that it seemed fitting to print “Wild Geese”—considered by many to be one of her greatest poems and certainly one of her most popular ever published—and to honor her place as one of this country’s most beloved writers.

¹ “Wild Geese” by Mary Oliver from *Dream Work*, Grove/Atlantic, Inc. Used by permission.

If there is such a thing as a “household name” in contemporary poetry, it is quite possibly hers. And though she was often dismissed by the literary elite, lambasted if not ignored, there is no denying her influence on an entire generation of readers. For many, Mary Oliver’s work was—and is—a gateway into the wider world of poetry; even those who claimed they “didn’t get poetry” could find something familiar, some image that resonated, some comfort in her company, some feeling they recognized though had not yet named.

Oliver published a new book every year or two and yet her work did not exhaust the beauties and mysteries at the intersection of the human and the natural world, the limits of consciousness and of language. Her poems were, for many, an inspired field guide—as attentive to flora and fauna as to the spiritual life and the heart and soul of humankind.

I don’t know that there is a better way to close this week than with her own words, an excerpt from her poem “When Death Comes.”

When it’s over I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.

I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.
I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world.

☪ About the poet

Mary Oliver (1935-2019) was a prolific writer; her most recent books include *A Thousand Mornings* (2012), *Dog Songs* (2013), *Blue Horses* (2014), *Felicity* (2015), *Upstream: Selected Essays* (2016), and *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (2017). She taught at Bennington College until 2001 and received such major awards as the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award. She gave a reading at St. Stephen’s in April 2011. Oliver lived in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and Hobe Sound, Florida, until her death in early 2019. She was 83.



Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

by Allison Seay, Associate for Religion and the Arts,
St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church © 2019