

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

October 7, 2019

A weekly poetry resource

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



## *Some Questions You Might Ask*

Is the soul solid, like iron?  
Or is it tender and breakable, like  
the wings of a moth in the beak of the owl?  
Who has it, and who doesn't?  
I keep looking around me.  
The face of the moose is as sad  
as the face of Jesus.  
The swan opens her white wings slowly.  
In the fall, the black bear carries leaves into the darkness.  
One question leads to another.  
Does it have a shape? Like an iceberg?  
Like the eye of a hummingbird?  
Does it have one lung, like the snake and the scallop?  
Why should I have it, and not the anteater  
who loves her children?  
Why should I have it, and not the camel?  
Come to think of it, what about the maple trees?  
What about the blue iris?  
What about all the little stones, sitting alone in the moonlight?  
What about roses, and lemons, and their shining leaves?  
What about the grass?

Mary Oliver<sup>1</sup>

## **Reflections**

It is a poem full of questions. Who is it we are asking? Is it really an answer we seek? Which of these things around us is sacred? Who here is the holy one? If you have been reading *Wellspring* for these three years or more, you might have noticed that Mary Oliver's work appears at least once every few weeks. Often, a poem of her strikes me as so searingly

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<sup>1</sup> "Some Questions You Might Ask" by Mary Oliver from *House of Light*, Beacon Press. Used by permission.

perfect—the perfect image in the perfect season at the perfect hour—that I wonder what I could possibly say that poetry does not say best itself.

In many ways, this poem is emblematic of the best of Oliver’s work which, again and again, returns to the question—often the unanswerable or rhetorical question—as a form of prayer and model for reverence. The questions here are asked in a posture of awe, in recognition of the sublime, rather than asked in eagerness or some desire for mere information. The subjects to which she pays faithful attention are subjects of daily life—in her noticing of creatures great and small, in her attention to the ordinary, extraordinary world, she opens our eyes to new possibilities, new worlds, new sounds, new creatures, new questions, new knowledge, her poetry a portal to some sacred experience.

Her famous line—“Attention is the beginning of devotion”—is a gentle form of moral instruction that permeates much of her work and, like Rumi or Keats and other ecstatic poets before her, it is her holy regard for every single thing—the deer, the vines, the petals of the iris, the dew, the moose, the stone, the beauty and decay of the world—that directs us in truth, distinguishes for us the difference in information and knowledge, knowledge and wisdom. Look around, she urges over and over again, notice this, hold this in your heart, and you will be taught what you need to know.

### ✚ About the poet

**Mary Oliver** (1935-2019) won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and the National Book Award, and her work ponders, essentially, the nature and meaning of the soul, the separation of self from nature, and the divinity present in the earthly world. One of the best-selling poets of all time and one of America’s most beloved writers, Oliver is known for her accessibility—her poems are most often written in a conversational style, in blank verse and without gimmick, offering for readers what many have called a “spiritual release” they did not know they sought. Born in Ohio, she spent much of her life in New England and then, later, in Florida. For more than 40 years, she lived with her partner, the photographer Molly Malone Cook, until Cook’s death in 2005. Mary Oliver died in January and would have celebrated her 84th birthday this month.



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