

## *The Wisdom and Compassion of Mary Oliver*

As many of you may know, the great American poet Mary Oliver died this month. And while I've been saddened by this loss I've also plunged again into her poetry with fresh eyes. I'd thought of sharing with you one of her poems, but on review I couldn't choose: there were so many that had so much to say about how to live.

Interconnected themes in her poetry that have been important for me are: pay attention, notice the natural world, one another and our heart-minds; open to gratitude and joy; be confounded by the mystery of being alive; live deeply; love deeply and trust your connection to all that is; and choose how to live.

In **Mindful** her message to herself, and to us by association as her readers, is *"to look, to listen, to lose myself inside this soft world – to instruct myself over and over in joy, and acclamation."* She proclaims in **Messenger** *"My work is loving the world,"* which naturally leads to gratitude and joy. In the same poem she admonishes us by admonishing herself:

*Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?  
Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect? Let me  
keep my mind on what matters,  
which is my work ...  
which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart  
and these body-clothes,  
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy...*

And so **When the Roses Speak, I Pay Attention**, Ms Oliver does so because the real threats – *"the heart-shackles"* - to living and loving fully, *"are not, as you think, death, illness, pain, unrequited hope, not loneliness, but lassitude, rue, vainglory, fear, anxiety, selfishness."* These are strong words, words meant to wake us up: they are words of wisdom and compassion balanced.

In **Snow Geese** Mary Oliver reminds us that it's *"as if delight were the most serious thing you ever felt."* Why? Is it just the beauty of the geese and the moment she doesn't want us to miss? No. It's much more than that:

*What matters  
is that, when I saw them,  
I saw them  
as through the veil, secretly, joyfully, clearly.*

Ms Oliver does not want to miss out on the wonder, the awe, the ineffable, the mystery of being alive. Opening and noticing the world around us is her simple recipe for being present to the 'burning bushes' that are all around us all the time. And yet, in **Little Summer Poem Touching the Subject of Faith** she's aware of her incapacity to truly see and hear the green growing world and she surrenders:

*And, therefore, let the immeasurable come.  
Let the unknowable touch the buckle of my spine.  
Let the wind turn in the trees,  
and the mystery hidden in the dirt  
  
swing through the air.*

As she says in **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...*

*I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.*

So what about me? What about you? Mary Oliver didn't just leave this world with beautiful poems, images and admonitions to notice the beauty and mystery of our lives. No. She pointed out to how to live. Yes, notice, be grateful, be joyful, be confounded by the mystery and, as she says in **In Blackwater Woods**: "love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it." In a word: choose your life.

And so when the going gets rough, when we feel abandoned, betrayed, lonely, bereft our task is to move in closer to the pain. As she says in **West Wind #2**:

*when you feel the mist on your mouth  
and sense ahead the embattlement, the long falls  
plunging and steaming – then row, row for your life  
toward it.*

But Mary Oliver's advice is not without compassion for the courage this takes. She reminds us that by opening and noticing the beauty and mystery of this world we discover our deep connection to it, our belonging, as she says so poignantly in **Wild Geese**:

*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.*

Being human is not easy. It's also wonderful. Will we let Mary Oliver's poems instruct us in how to live a life of wisdom and compassion? Will we, as she says in **The Journey** be "determined to save the only life you could save"? Will we respond with an open heart, mind and all of our being to her question in **The Summer Day**: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"