

Befriending the Thief; Remembering Mary Oliver

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Mary Oliver was a private person. She rarely gave interviews, preferring, as she said, to let her work speak *for* her. I will honor that and refrain from offering a bunch of facts about her amazing life. Instead, I'll let her *poetry* be the legacy she wanted you to hear and remember her by. I'll interweave it with some of my own thoughts about mortality, which is much on my mind the last few years, and especially as the pandemic took my aunt and so many others.

To begin, I want to share an excerpt from Mary's poem "To Live In This World."

“to live in this world
you must be able
to do three things
to love what is mortal;
to hold it
against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go”

To let it go. Not an easy ask.

My mother's father was born in 1894. Grandpa Stege was the oldest of seven children, so when his parents could no longer afford a coachman, care of the family's horses fell to him at the age of six, in the year 1900. Horses were transportation then, not recreation. Even living in New York City, he wouldn't see his first automobile until he was in his 20's.

In **my** 20's, when grandpa was 98 years old, I sat on his bed in a small-town hospital in Eastern Ohio. My mom had taken a break to play with my kids in the grassy courtyard. Grandpa had been asleep for several days, and we figured it wouldn't be long. I held his hand, a hand that just the week before had been hoeing in my mom's garden. Straightening up, he had cursed his arthritis yet again, saying as always: "Johnny, don't ever get old!" I didn't say anything, 'cause after he had mumbled through all the names of his kids and my siblings before finally lighting on "Johnny," I wasn't about to correct him with "JD", which I had changed my name to a few years before.

I sat on the side of the bed just looking at this quiet old man, and I don't know if I said it aloud or just in my head, but I said "You can go whenever you're ready

grandpa.” As though in response, the pauses between his breaths got longer and longer, until the pauses were far longer than the breaths. Within a few minutes, that last one-more-breath never came. So peaceful.

At his Memorial Service, I never cried. I cry in Disney movies, graduations, thoughtful conversations, you name it. But not at Grandpa’s service. I thought there must be something wrong with me. It took me years to realize that maybe those last quiet moments with him had been a bigger gift than I realized, offering a chance at a different relationship with death.

In her poem “The Uses of Sorrow” Mary Oliver writes:

“Someone I loved once gave me
a box full of darkness.
It took me years to understand
that this, too, was a gift.”

A box full of darkness. Not all deaths are beautiful or peaceful. A former student of mine, the most brilliant I had ever worked with, chose *my* alma mater for engineering school. I was so proud. Near the end of his Freshman year, he turned his vast intelligence toward engineering an elegant method for suffocating himself on the first day of summer break. It worked flawlessly. His body was discovered several days later by smell. Twenty-five years later I’m still angry and confused.

Another student, a year and a half after losing his only parent, his car left a rural road late at night and ran into a large boulder. No one saw it happen, but the debris left at the scene made it clear that any suffering was brief. For him at least, but not for his little brother and sister, now alone in the world.

I could go on and on; you probably can, too: Ann’s young cousin who didn’t wake up one day; mentors and friends gone too soon; dear friends cut down by cancer, ALS, dementia, addiction, heart attacks, and on and on. The day before Mary Oliver died in January 2019, another former student of mine died suddenly. I had seen him just five days before at the Pennsylvania State Fair. He had been radiant with the enthusiasm of new projects.

Let it go?!? Death is a thief! It steals away those we love with little warning, no right of return, no due process, and no redress of grievances. Who wants to be friends with a thief? Especially one so capricious and disloyal? One who rips our hearts out time after time after time?

I do.

The Hebrew book of Genesis says: From dust were ye made, and dust ye shall be. By

now you know that it's true; we are literally made from the dust of dying stars. Most of the atoms that make up the stuff in this room, and the room you're in, *including our bodies*, were created in the blast furnace of exploding supernova stars about nine billion years ago. Before the explosion, only light elements like hydrogen and helium. After the explosion, a dead star, and the surrounding space filled with precious heavy dust that gravity slowly collected into... all this. On the day that star died, was Death a thief or a midwife?

This idea, that the joy and creativity of life springs up from the soil of death was a common thread in Mary's poetry. In "The Kingfisher" she writes:

I think this is
the prettiest world--so long as you don't mind
a little dying, ...

Carl Sagan once said "The secrets of evolution are Time, and Death." There was a day in the late Cretaceous period, a truly dark day, probably a Monday, when Death rode in on a large asteroid. That was a hellish day to be a dinosaur. It wasn't exactly a good day for anyone on the planet, but for our mammalian ancestors, it turned out to be Independence Day, a birthday, Christmas and New Year's Eve all in one, a huge Gift, beautifully gift-wrapped in the smell of settling dust and rotting meat. None of us would be here this morning, the incredible creative processes of the Tertiary period would never have happened if the dinosaurs hadn't made way for us by dying. So on that day, was Death a thief? Or a midwife? This, too, was a gift.

While he lived, my mother's father worked in his generation's equivalent of Silicon Valley, but in New Jersey: electricity, motors and generators, new high-tech replacements for whale oil, horses and man-power. My grandpa installed the first high-pressure steam turbines at Sing Sing prison, turbines which powered the now-infamous electric chair. He later served as chief engineer on the dredge that built Tangier Island in Chesapeake Bay. Rough work with rough men in rough conditions.

My grandfather had a different rude name for every ethnicity in Europe. He had only one rude name for all the ethnicities of Africa, and one more for those of Asia. My Grandpa had clear categories for people, constructed out of ethnic and racial stereotypes, a world-view that segmented his view of everyone he met. He wasn't overtly hateful, he just believed the stereotypes, and the culture in which he grew and lived supported that. Confirmation bias and rough conditions made it obvious, as in "that's just the way it is."

In spite of all that, I think my grandfather's life is worth honoring. I know that the same day his second child was born, he was fired from his job at a silk dying company because he had reported them for dumping many tons of toxic chemicals

into the Passaic River. He just shrugged, and took a job as Chief engineer at St. Joseph's Hospital, though he had plenty of rude names for Catholics too!

He was fifty, and he worked at St. Joseph's for the next 25 years, overseeing the construction of facilities that more than doubled the hospital's physical plant, helping save and improve countless lives in the process.

As well as I loved him, and still do; as glad as I am that we have pictures of him holding my young children, I'm also glad he wasn't around for their formative years, passing on stereotypes and prejudices. So, was my grandfather stolen from me, or was his passing a gift, given by him to his great-grand-children, and the hope they represented - even to him - for a better, kinder, more just future.

I was talking about that with my daughter, now an ordained UU minister, and she said "Yeah, Dad, just imagine if pre-civil-war plantation owners were still around serving in the Senate!" We joked about how we HAVE that! But of course things ARE better, and it's partly because dinosaurs of all kinds have their day, and then die.

I'm a dinosaur too! This is my day, and it's going to end, maybe this afternoon, maybe fifty years from now, but it WILL end. I can hear evolution's call for my death already, in my struggle to get the pronouns right for my transitioning ... niece or nephew?

I see it in my indignant arguments against veganism, and the implicit bias of my entire generation when it comes to race and gender. It shows up in my driving when I could bike, and using the dryer when we have a clothesline right there. My death, too, will be a gift.

I want to read more of that same Mary Oliver poem Kingfisher, because I deliberately took that line out of context a few minutes ago.

The kingfisher rises out of the black wave
like a blue flower, in his beak
he carries a silver leaf. I think this is
the prettiest world--so long as you don't mind
a little dying, how could there be a day in your
whole life
that doesn't have its splash of happiness?
There are more fish than there are leaves
on a thousand trees, and anyway the kingfisher
wasn't born to think about it, or anything else.
When the wave snaps shut over his blue head, the
water
remains water--hunger is the only story

he has ever heard in his life that he could believe.
I don't say he's right. Neither do I say he's wrong. Religiously he swallows the silver leaf with its broken red river, and with a rough and easy cry
I couldn't rouse out of my thoughtful body if my life depended on it, he swings back over the bright sea to do the same thing, to do it (as I long to do something, anything) perfectly.

Whether you are a kingfisher or a person, to live is to eat, and to eat is to kill. We can argue about the relative harm of killing plants or killing animals, but either way death is *right there* in every mouthful. From the big bang right through the next election and beyond, death and loss are inextricably linked to birth and creation. Yes, Death is a thief, but also a midwife. It takes and gives with the same hands.

My life is a gift, a gift only made possible by the deaths of stars, of dinosaurs, of deep mammalian ancestors, grandparents, and the dead animals and plants I ate for breakfast this morning. It's a gift I will pay forward by getting my spoiled 20th century butt out of the way of 22nd century progress, whether I like it or not.

But I don't want to die! I don't want to not exist! I want to be part of something permanent, I want to participate! I want some part of me to live on! And it does. A friend who loves my Science and Spirituality work had just lost her grandfather, who she calls Papa, and she asked me to write something hopeful about the afterlife. I wrote, and this is a long quote:

“Remember, our bodies are not things; we are flows. What was an apple yesterday is now me, and what was me yesterday is now Chesapeake Bay. Some of what was me when I just typed that, has now flown out to become wind and weather, having been replaced by some millions of atoms that, last week were your Papa. Another breath, another few million atoms that were once your Papa, and you, and the girl down the street, and everyone else who ever lived on the earth.

You and me, in and out, day after day, co-mingling together on an inter-woven planet of living flow. And before they were your Papa, those atoms were someone, something else: Giant redwoods. Gentle giraffes. Oceans. Mountains. Lava. Your Papa came from everything, was part of everything, and is everything still. Atoms and energy that once flowed through your Papa will go on, to adventure as opalescent seashells, new-born infants that smell like God

herself, starlight on the endless journey between galaxies, and the lightest sweetest cornbread you ever tasted.”

Here’s how Mary Oliver said it, in her poem *Sleeping In The Forest*:

I thought the earth remembered me, she
took me back so tenderly, arranging
her dark skirts, her pockets
full of lichens and seeds. I slept
as never before, a stone
on the riverbed, nothing
between me and the white fire of the stars
but my thoughts, and they floated
light as moths among the branches
of the perfect trees. All night
I heard the small kingdoms breathing
around me, the insects, and the birds
who do their work in the darkness. All night
I rose and fell, as if in water, grappling
with a luminous doom. By morning
I had vanished at least a dozen times
into something better.

Our cultural metaphors warn us about Death as a hooded figure, stealthily approaching, approaching, coming for us. I am learning to think about it the other way around: Death is already here; death is inside every seed, every warm spring day, every birth, inside every pregnant moment, waiting with loving arms... for me. *I* walk towards **Death**, inexorably, inevitably. My only choice is whether to walk with my back to it, fearful and closed, or to turn and embrace death with open arms, saying “Welcome thief! Welcome friend! I’m ready. I’m ready to share forward what you gave me, so that others, *new* others, may live and breathe and create a better world after me.”

Yeah, that all sounds nice, and I’m sincere in it, but it doesn’t patch up the emptiness left by people I love who were stolen away. The projects Josh enthused about at the State Fair will never happen, and his family will miss him at every holiday, every birthday. I still hear my grandfather’s voice every time I strip a wire or use his tools, and I wish he could see my children now.

When people die, their absence remains, and everything is different without them. For grieving survivors, the sorrow death brings is as much a part of the landscape as lilies. Mary’s poem “*The Lilies Break Open Over the Dark Water*” expresses this beautifully. She writes:

“And there you are
on the shore,

fitful and thoughtful, trying
to attach them to an idea —
some news of your own life.
But the lilies

are slippery and wild—they are
devoid of meaning, they are
simply doing,
from the deepest

spurs of their being,
what they are impelled to do
every summer.
And so, dear sorrow, are you.”

Death is a disloyal, greedy thief. We can befriend him or not, but ya know, you can't “unfriend” him, any more than you can unfriend Life. Death and Life are that cute elderly couple who still have tickle fights under the covers, and make flirty eyes as they walk hand in hand by the lily pond. Together they do horrible, wonderful things. This, too, is a gift.

The grieving process, whether it be for loved ones or a favorite poet, or for the losses that come with a global pandemic, or the pending consequences of a broken climate, grief is arduous, and personal. Today as we remember Mary Oliver and contemplate impermanence, let us live knowing that Death's gift to us is no less than Life itself, given **to** us at birth and again with every meal, but given **by** us only once, a gift of renewal to all who come after. Let us celebrate existence *and* mourn our losses. Let our rememberings and our sorrows be a gift, to ourselves, to one another, and to those who come after.

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Parting Words/Benediction:

We'll give Mary Oliver the last word, with an enduring favorite, her poem 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.