

'Listen the river is singing: Mary Oliver and the Gift of Learning to Pay Attention'

by Carol O'Connor

Spiritual Reading Group - Carmelite Centre, Wednesday 15th September, 10.30am-12 midday. Zoom.

The poems below are set out in the order we will be looking at them.

The main poems under discussion will be -

'I Happened to be Standing'

'The Summer Day'

'Invitation'

'Drifting'

1 Poetry?

"with my notebook open"

from: 'I happened to be Standing'

What I Can Do

The television has two instruments that control it.

I get confused.

The washer asks me, do you want regular or delicate?

Honestly, I just want clean.

Everything is like that.

I won't even mention cell phones.

I can turn on the light of the lamp beside my chair
where a book is waiting, but that's about it.

Oh yes, and I can strike a match and make fire.

from Blue Horses, 2014

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What We Want

In a poem
people want
something fancy,

but even more
they want something
inexplicable

made plain,

easy to swallow -
not unlike a suddenly
harmonic passage

in an otherwise
difficult and sometimes dissonant
symphony -

even if it is only
for the moment
of hearing it.

from *Blue Horses*, 2014

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I happened to be standing

I don't know where prayers go,
or what they do.
Do cats pray, while they sleep
half-asleep in the sun?
Does the opossum pray as it
crosses the street?
The sunflowers? The old black oak
growing older every year?
I know I can walk through the world,
along the shore or under the trees,
with my mind filled with things
of little importance, in full
self-attendance. A condition I can't really
call being alive.
Is a prayer a gift, or a petition,
or does it really matter?
The sunflowers blaze, maybe that's their way.
Maybe the cats are sound asleep. Maybe not.

While I was thinking this I happened to be standing
just outside my door, with my notebook open,
which is the way I begin every morning.
Then a wren in the privet began to sing.
He was positively drenched in enthusiasm,
I don't know why. And yet, why not.

I wouldn't persuade you from what you believe
or whatever you don't. That's your business.
But I thought of the wren's singing, what could this be
if it isn't prayer?
So I just listened, my pen in the air.

from A Thousand Mornings, 2012

2 Imagination

'Keep some room in your heart for the unimaginable'
from Evidence

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.

From Owls and Other Fantasies, 2003

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The Summer Day

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

from **House of Light**, 1990

3 Pay Attention!

'Attention is the beginning of devotion'

from: Interview with Kristiva Tippett

Luke

I had a dog
 who loved flowers.
 Briskly she went
 through the fields,

yet paused
 for the honeysuckle
 or the rose,
 her dark head

and her wet nose
 touching
 the face
 of every one

with its petals

of silk,
with its fragrance
rising

into the air
where the bees
their bodies
heavy with pollen

hovered -
and easily
she adored
every blossom,

not in the serious,
careful way
that we choose
this blossom or that blossom -

the way we praise or don't praise -
the way we love
or don't love -
but the way

we long to be -
that happy
in the heaven of earth -
that wild, that loving.

*from **Dog Songs**, 2013*

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I Go Down to the Shore

I go down to the shore in the morning
and depending on the our the waves
are rolling in or moving out,
and I say, oh, I am miserable,
what shall -
what should I do? And the sea says
in its lovely voice:
Excuse me, I have work to do.

*from **A Thousand Mornings**, 2012*

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Invitation

Oh do you have time
to linger
for just a little while
out of your busy

and very important day
for the goldfinches
that have gathered
in a field of thistles

for a musical battle,
to see who can sing
the highest note,
or the lowest,

or the most expressive of mirth,
or the most tender?
Their strong, blunt beaks
drink the air

as they strive
melodiously
not for your sake
and not for mine

and not for the sake of winning
but for sheer delight and gratitude -
believe us, they say,
it is a serious thing

just to be alive
on this fresh morning
in this broken world.
I beg of you,

do not walk by
without pausing
to attend to this
rather ridiculous performance.

It could mean something.

It could mean everything.
It could be what Rilke meant, when he wrote:
You must change your life.

from Red Bird, 2008

4 On Being Human in Time

“About God, how could he give up his secrets and still be God?”
from A Little Ado, About This and That

The Gift

Be still, my soul, and steadfast.
Earth and heaven both are still watching
though time is draining from the clock
and your walk, that was confident and quick,
has become slow.

So, be slow if you must, but let
the heart still play its true part.
Love still as once you loved, deeply
and without patience. Let God and the world
know you are grateful. That the gift has been given.

from Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver, 2009

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On Meditating, Sort Of

Meditation, so I've heard, is best accomplished
if you entertain a certain strict posture.
Frankly, I prefer just to lounge under a tree.
So why should I think I could ever be successful?
Some days I fall asleep, or land in that
even better place - half-asleep - where the world,
spring, summer, autumn, winter -
flies through my mind in its
hardy ascent and its uncompromising descent.

So I just lie like that, while distance and time
reveal their true attitudes: they never
heard of me, and never will, or ever need to.

Of course I wake up finally
thinking, how wonderful to be who I am,
made out of earth and water,
my own thoughts, my own fingerprints -
all that glorious, temporary stuff.

from **Blue Horses**, 2014

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Drifting

I was enjoying everything in the rain, the path
 wherever it was taking me, the earth roots
 beginning to stir.
I didn't intend to start thinking about God,
 it just happened.
How God, or the gods, are invisible,
 quite understandable.
But holiness is visible, entirely.
It's wonderful to walk along like that,
 thought not the usual intention to reach an answer
 but merely drifting.
Like clouds that only seem weightless
 but of course are not.
Are really important.
I mean, terribly important.
Not decoration by any means.
By next week the violets will be blooming.
Anyway, this was my delicious walk in the rain.
What was it actually about?

Think about what it is that music is trying to say.
It was something like that.

from **Blue Horses**, 2014