

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula
Sunday August 5th 2018

Reading: “The Summer Day”

Mary Oliver has won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for her poetry. Many of her collections have been published by Beacon Press, which is a department of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and she has been a Ware Lecturer at the UUA’s General Assembly. Certainly her Nature-oriented poems are appealing to a great many UUs, and our reading this morning is one of her most popular poems, “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?

Sermon: “Your One Wild and Precious Life”

“Zaphod leapt out of his seat.

“What’s happened to the missiles?’ he asked.

“A new and astounding image appeared on the screens.

“They would appear,’ said Ford doubtfully, ‘to have turned into a bowl of petunias and a very surprised looking whale...’

“Against all probability, a whale had suddenly been called into existence several miles above the surface of an alien planet.

“And since this is not a naturally tenable position for a whale, this poor, innocent creature had very little time to come to terms with its identity as a whale before it then had to come to terms with not being a whale any more.

“This is a complete record of its thoughts from the moment it began its life till the moment it ended.

“Ah...! What’s happening? it thought.

“Er, excuse me, who am I?

“Hello?

“Why am I here? What’s my purpose in life?

“What do I mean by who am I?

“Calm down, get a grip now... Oh! This is an interesting sensation, what is it? It’s a sort of ... yawning, tingling sensation in my... my... well, I suppose I’d better start finding names for things if I want to make any headway in what for the sake of what I shall call an argument I shall call the world, so let’s call it my stomach.

“Good. Oooh, it’s getting quite strong. And hey, what about this whistling roaring sound going past what I’m suddenly going to call my head? Perhaps I can call that... wind! Is that a good name? It’ll do... Perhaps I can find a better name for it later when I’ve found out what it’s for. It must be something very important because there

certainly seems to be a lot of it. Hey! What's this thing? This... let's call it a tail — yeah, tail. Hey! I can really thrash it about pretty good, can't I? Wow! Wow! That feels great! Doesn't seem to achieve very much but I'll probably find out what it's for later on. Now — have I built up a coherent picture of things yet?

“No.

“Never mind. Hey, this is really exciting, so much to find out about, so much to look forward to, I'm quite dizzy with anticipation...

“Or is it the wind?

“There really is a lot of that now, isn't there?

“And wow! Hey! What's this thing suddenly coming towards me very fast? Very, very fast. So big and flat and round, it needs a big wide sounding name like... ow... ound... round... ground! That's it! That's a good name — ground!

“I wonder if it will be friends with me?

“And the rest, after a sudden wet thud, was silence.

“Curiously enough, the only thing that went through the mind of the bowl of petunias as it fell was Oh no, not again. Many people have speculated that if we knew exactly why the bowl of petunias had thought that, we would know a lot more about the nature of the Universe than we do now.”

This passage comes from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams, and describes events just after Arthur Dent has saved everyone on the Heart of Gold spaceship from destruction by two missiles launched from the planet below. Activating the drive that moves the ship through space on the basis of improbability, the two missiles have, against all likelihood, been turned into a bowl of petunias and a whale, each of which have their own ways of responding to the surprising fact of their existence.

For all that a spaceship powered by improbability that can also turn objects into other random objects is an absurd premise, the complete record of the whale's thoughts during its short life are also a reflection of the absurdity to existence. We do not come into being as fully conscious entities that are immediately capable of questioning our situation, but that's something that does come to us with time and experience. After all, as we grow and as we age, sooner or later we find ourselves struggling to come to terms with the surprising fact of our own existence, and we struggle more to come to terms with the fact that one day we shall cease existing. We have more time, thankfully, and there's much less certainty compared to the inevitability of a whale falling through the air and crashing into the ground, but otherwise we have many of the same questions: What's happening? Who am I? Why am I here? What's my purpose in life?

Speaking of purpose in life, I first heard Mary Oliver's poem, "The Summer Day", in a Sunday morning service at a Unitarian Universalist congregation. It ends with the sort of question that sends shivers down your spine when you first hear it, because nobody's ever put it that way before, perhaps because nobody's ever asked it of you before: What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

What a great question! It's no wonder this is one of those poems that gets read a lot in UU services! Now when I first heard that question, I heard it as a call to action, as a call to find some big, grand purpose. I didn't make much of the "wild" part, but I was certainly on board with the "precious" part. "Doesn't everything die at last," Oliver asks, "and too soon?" So as I understood her, yes, life's too short and too precious, not mention that you only get one shot at it, there's simply too much at stake to get stuck in little stuff that really doesn't matter. So go on, get out there, I heard her saying, and find something big and important that really matters while you still have the chance.

But as I've spent more time with her poem, I don't think that's what Oliver is really telling us. Or, at least, it's not as simple as "life is short so do something big". It's easy, of course, to focus on the last couple of lines of a poem, especially when it asks a question that has such an emotional impact on us, but we can't ignore everything else in the poem that led up to that final question.

There was, for instance, another question, right before the rhetorical "doesn't everything die at last", and here she sounded somewhat defensive: "Tell me, what else should I have done?" After all, she'd been talking about how she was strolling through

the fields, how she'd been falling down in the grass to look at a grasshopper, and there are plenty of people who would think that Oliver was just messing around and wasting time that she could put to more profitable use. She even describes her strolling through the fields and falling down in the grass as being "idle and blessed", admitting to something that is not considered a virtue in our society! Think of any proverb about idleness and it won't say anything good.

Oliver doesn't just admit to being idle, though; she also says she was being blessed. In fact, when talking about what she had been doing in the fields, in the grass, she uses terms suggestive of religion. Getting down on her knees to take a closer look at that grasshopper requires paying some serious attention to what she's doing, to what she's experiencing; that's something she says she knows how to do, which means she's had a lot of practice at it. In some religious traditions, of course, paying attention is named mindfulness and it's a central, if not the central, spiritual discipline. Oliver tries to be modest about it, saying she doesn't "know exactly what a prayer is", pretending that kneeling down and paying close attention isn't a form of prayer, but of course it is.

Thanks to paying attention, Oliver saw how the grasshopper "lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face" then "snaps her wings open, and floats away." Oliver would never have experienced that if she hadn't been strolling in the fields and noticed the grasshopper down in the grass. She doesn't say why she was carrying sugar or how she enticed the grasshopper into her hand to eat it, but it's entirely thanks to her ability to be "idle and blessed" that she discovered the curious way that a grasshopper eats and the complexity of its eyes, "moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down", "gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes." You've got to be paying close attention, you've got to be really close, to see how a grasshopper's mouth parts are moving as it eats, to see the structure of its insect eyes. It'd be natural to wonder how something so strange, so alien could come to be in our world. It'd be natural to wonder how all these amazing creatures — grasshoppers and black bears and swans — came to be, how the world itself came to be. "Who made the world?", Oliver's poem begins, with a big question about existence itself, trying to find some meaning in the absurdity. She might as well be asking: What's happening? Who am I? Why am I here? What's my purpose in life?

I don't know how many of us ever consider ourselves "idle and blessed", but perhaps we can look back at our lives and remember times when we were. For most of

us, it was in childhood, particular at this time of year, when school was out during the Summer. I remember, when I was a young child, spending a lot of time in our back garden, simply exploring what was out there.

Oh, we had a television, but at the time there were just three channels, and there was rarely anything good on. (Strangely enough, the same seems to be true even when there are hundreds of channels...) I had toys in the house, but on a nice day my parents encouraged me to be outside. I don't remember any grasshoppers, but there were plenty of snails and butterflies, the occasional toad and sometimes a hedgehog that'd got lost. My parents had fruit trees and grew some vegetables, though the best part for me was discovering when blackberries appeared in the brambles along the back fence. I know I'm romanticizing it, of course, as memories of skinned knees and wasp stings have faded, but my parents still have pictures and even films recording how much time I spent just being in that garden.

How many of us get to spend time like that as adults? (I'm not talking about gardening, which I know many people here do.) Is it okay to ever be so "idle and blessed" now? Certainly there are responsibilities that we cannot shirk as adults, most notably sustaining ourselves, our families, and others under our care. There's work we have to do, to earn what we need to live, and then there's maintenance of what we're using to live, from keeping a home clean to doing the laundry. There's a growing recognition, though, of the importance of self-care, that it's not just about earning and maintenance. Not only do we need to sustain our bodies, but we need to rest our minds and replenish our souls, too. Sometimes we have to learn that the hard way, but if we're lucky, there's someone who'll share such wisdom with us. I once had a co-worker, for instance, who told me how he discovered that if he stayed at work past a certain time of day, he'd then need to spend twice as much time the following morning fixing all of the mistakes he'd made. More work doesn't necessarily mean better. Putting in time and effort is good, but not if it's at the expense of our own well-being.

We need a certain amount of time to be "idle and blessed" in our lives. We may not get to behave like children, which I hasten to add is probably a good thing, but that only means we need to figure out how to be "idle and blessed" as adults. After all, we know that our bodies need to get enough sleep and eat properly and drink plenty of water and exercise, but we also need opportunities to occupy our minds in other ways, to nourish our souls outside of work and maintenance. Certainly studies have shown that

when people involved in demanding work take a break, they do better at their work when they return. I know that if I'm working on something, and I get stuck, I try to catch myself before I'm beating my head against it, and I make myself go and do something else for a while that has nothing to do with my problem. Quite often, once I come back, it's no longer so much of a problem.

However, there's also the importance of simply enjoying our "one wild and precious life" for its own sake, not for what it can do for us. Yes, doing something big and important is good. Yes, we should be better at avoiding getting stuck in the little stuff. But often, what really matters is right in front of us, and all we need to do is start paying attention to it. So of course Oliver defends her right to be out in the fields, noticing things in the grass that most other people have never even seen before. To them, she might seem to be wasting her time, but she's paying close attention, arguably praying, exercising her curiosity and wondering about the strangeness and absurdity of existence itself.

Now isn't that, really, what we do here every time we gather? Sure, there are tasks we need to complete and work we need to do in order to maintain our ability to gather here, to keep up the facilities and pay for programs and serve food and coffee on a Sunday morning, but isn't what matters most that we are here to celebrate that "life is the greatest gift of all"? And who says we can only do that in certain appropriately church-y ways?

After all, most of us here would have a hard time saying that we know exactly what prayer is, but we can certainly learn how to be better at paying attention, how to be better at spending time with good friends, with children, with Nature, with ideas, wondering and questioning. Maybe, to others, it might seem that we're not doing religion the right way, that we're not putting enough work into it, but we know we're blessed. What else should we be doing? Life's too short to let it pass us by. So tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

May it be so.