

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?

—Mary Oliver

The Summer Day
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Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Outer Banks
August 5, 2018

For most people, I suspect, and certainly for me, it's the last few lines of Mary Oliver's poem that resonate most powerfully. Speaking as if to someone who might be chiding her for squandering her day so wastefully, strolling idly through the fields and contemplating the chewing grasshopper, she says,

Tell me, what else should I have done?

. . . . Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

It's a wonderful, blunt challenge flung in the face of a culture that measures the value of human beings by our worth as units in the productivity of the economy of commerce and industry. The habit carries over from our workdays to pervade every aspect of our lives, where we've learned to measure the quality of a day by what we've accomplished. It's been a good morning, we say, I got a lot done. Tough day yesterday, we say, just couldn't seem to make progress on anything.

How can you justify a whole day spent walking on the beach or wandering around the woods? Did you at least collect some good beach glass you could make into something, or pick up some litter, or clear out that place where the path has gotten so overgrown? Did you walk fast enough to burn off some extra calories, or get some aerobic benefit? At least that would be *productive!*

Wendell Berry's "Mad Farmer Liberation Front" warns us of the dire consequences that await if we fall for the idolatry of productivity.

*Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.
And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.
When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.*

Oh no, Mary Oliver says. "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

With her opening question “Who made the world?” and her turn in the middle of the poem to say “I don’t know exactly what a prayer is,” Oliver makes it clear that she’s not just inviting us to indulge the joys of an idle summer’s afternoon. Her challenge to the dogmas of productivity asks questions at the fundamental level about what is, in fact, the purpose of our existence. What she has been doing this summer day has been a long act of prayer, an intentional immersion of herself in the presence of whatever is sacred, whatever is at the root of this miraculous existence that gives us the world and the swan and the bear and the grasshopper, whatever it is that gives us our very life.

“What else should I have done?” she asks. Would it really have been a better use of time to be toiling away at some project, or doing chores, or putting in hours on some kind of production line? We may well have to do such work, in fact most of us depend on it for our very survival—but is it *better*? Is the purpose of our lives to produce things to exchange for other things, or is it to make meaning, find joy, share love?

It’s risky, of course, to speak of *the* purpose of our lives as if there’s only one and as if we’re likely to know with certainty what that one purpose is in the space of one lifetime. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. a Unitarian himself, said of one of his fictional characters:

“Kilgore Trout once wrote a short story which was a dialogue between two pieces of yeast. They were discussing the possible purposes of life as they ate sugar and suffocated in their own excrement. Because of their limited intelligence, they never came close to guessing that they were making champagne.”

For all we know, we may be engaged in some cosmic fermentation that will one day intoxicate and delight the Universe. Meanwhile, we work with the clues we have around us. And from those, the faiths of the world as well as the insights of evolutionary biology and psychology all suggest, each in their own way, that we’re here to notice and appreciate and engage with the magnificence of the living Universe we find ourselves in. We’re here to participate in the creativity and interconnection that weaves us all into the shimmering fabric of existence. We’re here to interact with other living beings in ways that enhance and improve all our lives, increasing the human family’s capacity for compassion, connection, and joy.

That’s all very well, you might be thinking, but some of us have to work for a living, and after a long day, a long week, a long summer, a long year of serving up meals, or taking care of sick and injured folks, or remodeling kitchens, or getting people into the homes of their dreams, or teaching, or any of the many other ways we pass our days, there’s not that much time or energy left over for contemplating grasshoppers. What’s more, there are things in this world and in our society that need to be changed; there are hurts and hatreds, inequities and iniquities that require more than good wishes and positive energy to resolve.

I don’t think, no matter what it may seem she is saying, that Mary Oliver means for us all to take up a life suitable only for people who are on vacation, or unemployed—or for people who have

the privilege of being able to afford unlimited hours of leisure time; nor do I think she means that we should all become writers, artists, contemplative spiritual teachers, professional intellectuals, religious leaders, astrophysicists, and other professionals whose work specifically demands that they spend their time thinking in the largest possible context, seeking the great presence of the sacred or the ultimate in every working moment.

“The Summer Day” is not a poem about disengaging from the world; it’s about engaging with it—fully, whole-heartedly, passionately, without reserve.

The contemplative spiritual teacher and writer Gerald May, in his book *The Awakened Heart*, said this:

“. . . now and then in especially graced moments, a flash of truly unconditional love bursts through me. . . . In that flash, my actions are determined neither by my conscience nor by my desire. They come from pure, simple loving responsiveness to the needs of the situation at hand.”

Theologian Frederick Buechner says it even more simply: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”

What would it mean if the purpose of our lives, the standard measure of our productivity, was pure, simple loving responsiveness to the needs of the situation at hand? How might we then choose to spend our one wild and precious life?

What would it mean, what would it feel like, to notice the need of whatever moment we find ourselves in, and to respond to it lovingly with all the energy of our being?

What does a simple, loving responsiveness ask of us, what does it feel like—

When we notice that our own families need us to provide economic sustenance, yes, but also to offer our tender attention and empathy, our companionship and vulnerability?

What does a simple, loving responsiveness ask of us, what does it feel like—

When we recognize the people at work around us, not just as helpful or difficult partners in churning out the various tasks at hand but as companions whose lives are touched and affected by ours, just as our lives are touched by theirs?

What does that loving responsiveness feel like when we realize that neighbors, friends, even loved ones have grown so broken and blinded by fear and misunderstanding that they have closed their hearts to the degradation of our nation?

What does loving responsiveness ask of us, when we learn that children are being hurt and terrorized, that parents are being brutally subjected to their worst nightmare, because they have committed the crime of trying to flee from intolerable danger to a country—to our country—where they thought they would find shelter and compassion?

Turning aside from the dogmas of productivity and accomplishment that drive our money-worshipping society also means freeing ourselves from the idea that our engagement with the world's deep hunger, as Buechner calls it, or even with the everyday needs of the workaday world, has to produce measurable achievements and results in order to justify the effort. Oliver's invitation, I think, is for us instead to see our own full immersion in the reality of the moment, and our own experience of the presence of the Sacred even in the most mundane or the most harrowing of events, as the point and the measure of the worthiness of our engagement.

We don't need to "succeed." We need to *engage*.

I don't really think we can live all the time at the pitch of ecstasy and immersion that a poet reaches at the height of composition in a poem. Still, we can listen and tune ourselves some part of every day for the presence and the call of whatever power we believe is behind this world and this life. We can find moments to allow ourselves to be transfixed, moved, drawn irresistibly into the delights, the sorrows, and the needs of the life that surrounds us all the time. We can respond lovingly to the needs of the situation at hand.

At the end of this or any day, we can invite ourselves to ask a different set of questions from the usual round about what we managed to get done today.

How alive was I today? How much love did I share, how much did I offer? How much time did I spend *noticing* the preciousness and beauty and wonder all around me? How often did I notice the preciousness and beauty and wonder *within* me? How, today, did I meet the deep hunger of the world? What have I done, today, with my one wild and precious life? What will I do with it tomorrow?

May this day—may every day, whatever its needs and demands—be for you and for us all a gift and a blessing.