



Everyday Sacred: How Mary Oliver's Poems Inspire Me to "Eat the Blessed Earth"

by Kim M. Baker

*This is the earnest work. Each one of us
is given/only so many mornings to do it---/to
look around and love/the oily fur of
our lives /the hoof and the grass-stained muzzle.¹*

It is not always easy to "love the oily fur" of my life. Even now in my mid-fifties, childhood traumas still stick out their tongues at me in ways that make me pause. It's sometimes hard to appreciate the "grass-stained muzzle" of working and nurturing relationships, of owning a home and paying bills.

While there are more than enough self-help strategies and gurus, I know that, often, what I really need to do is take a walk in the woods, on the beach, by a stream. Or as Mary Oliver would do, drink from a pond "flavored with oak leaves and also, no doubt,/the feet of ducks."² Even become a rose "in a field full of roses./Fear has not yet occurred to them . . ."³

Mary Oliver, the exquisite poet from Provincetown, is beloved on the Cape and far beyond. Everyday neighbors like me crave the simplicity of her words, the spiritual depth of her insights about nature, about life. The way a black bear "risen" in spring brings "perfect love": "Whatever else/my life is/with its poems/and its music/and its glass cities,/it is also this dazzling darkness/coming/down the mountain,/breathing and tasting . . ."⁴

But Mary Oliver searches the woods for more than spring and resurrection metaphors. She searches for her soul on that mountain, in that bear. And she has taught me to search there for mine.

How often I have wandered the world unaware of the blissful, whispery silence beneath a maple tree. Maybe that is soul. Or worse, I have convinced myself that insects are just pests and rain ruins plans.

But Mary sees things differently: "It took four of us to carry her into the woods./We did not think of music,/but, anyway, it began to rain/slowly."⁵

Mary Oliver invokes the mysticism of nature even when burying a beloved dog. More than that, she invokes every human to get out into nature. To be amazed there. To be saved there.

In October 2009, my partner and I attended a Mary Oliver reading at Cape Cod Community College. This free reading was compliments of Titcomb's Bookshop in Sandwich, part of its year-long reading series to celebrate 40 years in business as an independent bookseller. An extraordinarily generous party thrown by the Titcomb family.

If you're a poet, you know that most poetry readings are a handful of poets reading to each other. But hundreds of people showed up to hear Mary Oliver read! The auditorium was filled to capacity and overflowing.

After the reading, my partner and I got into line to have a cherished volume autographed. When it was our turn, Betsy, a United Church of Christ Congregational minister, told Ms. Oliver that she often uses Ms. Oliver's poems in her weekly sermons. Ms. Oliver said that was terrific. But, she added, "tell them to get out into nature themselves! Better yet, take them to the woods instead of staying inside delivering a sermon!"

Mary Oliver's poetry is magical and mystical. Hearing her read her own words is enthralling. Pick up one of her CDs, and you will know what I mean. Ms. Oliver's poetry is a siren call to nature, to learn about the sacredness of life from life itself.

The poet entreats me to imagine every animal as my Buddha. Every tree and flower and river as my brother and sister. She wants me to discover my "Sangha," as the Buddhist tradition teaches: "The Sangha signifies cooperation, collaboration, inclusiveness, and interbeing----being connected with others. This includes the entire community of beings, seen and unseen, human and otherwise----the entire boundless circle."⁶

Finding solace in nature, even from life's sorrows, is one of the most moving aspects of Ms. Oliver's poetry. She finds comfort from unrequited love found in dune flowers, and takes comfort even from death in cherishing the simplicity of birds, the amazement of a common day. She does not wallow in a fear of death,

but awaits it by doing, by being:

". . . and I think of each life as a flower, as common/as a field daisy, and as singular . . . 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."⁷

Mary Oliver encourages me to be one with nature. To celebrate the food there: "In fall it is mushrooms/gathered from dampness/under the pines:/in spring I have known/the taste of the lamb/full of milk and spring grass;/today it is beans green and yellow/and lettuce and basil from my friends' garden-/how calmly, as though it were an ordinary thing,/we eat the blessed earth."⁸

But mostly, Ms. Oliver calls on me to "eat the blessed earth" in all I do. To be awed. To be humbled.

And so I go to nature everyday to "find my place in the family of things."⁹ So do I dare call Ms. Oliver's poems prayers? Some have. But I don't want to limit her inspiration by binding the poems into a form, but rather want to lift up their message, the rapture of their imagery and music, as a call to the outdoors, as a meditation.

Won't you join Mary there in the fields, by the pond dressed in your oily fur? Won't you join me in mine? We can sit by the pond. Drink the feet of ducks. Eat the blessed earth. We can read each other poetry and revel in the sacred of every day.

1. "The Deer. *House of Light*.
2. "Mornings at Blackwater." *Redbird*.
3. "Roses, Late Summer." *House of Light*.
4. "Spring." *House of Light*.
5. "Her Grave." *New and Selected Poems*.
6. Lama Surya Das. *Awakening the Buddha Within*. p.68
7. "When Death Comes." *New and Selected Poems*.
8. "Beans Green and Yellow." *Swan*.
9. "Wild Geese." *New and Selected Poems*.



When she isn't teaching the abundant virtues of the comma, writing about big hair and Elvis, and doing the Cha Cha, Kim Baker works to end violence against women. Kim performs in the annual *Until the Violence Stops Festival Providence*.

Her poems have been published online and in print. Her most recent reasons to cha cha cha include fourth place in the Poetry Society of New Hampshire National Poetry Contest, *This I Believe* essays broadcast on NPR of Rhode Island, and first play stage-reading at the Culture*Park Play Marathon in New Bedford, Massachusetts about a middle-aged female survivor of childhood sexual assault. Kim is currently writing a book of ekphrastic poems about Cape Cod art.

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