



# WHAT MAKES US ONE

*REFLECTIONS ON THE  
POETRY OF MARY OLIVER*

## **What Makes Us One: Reflections on the poetry of Mary Oliver - Part 1**

When I know that the world around me is both the hiding place and the revelation of God, I can no longer make a distinction between the natural and the supernatural, between the holy and the profane. ...Everything I see and know is indeed one “*uni-verse*”, revolving around one coherent center. This Divine Presence seeks connection and communion, not separation or division – *except for the sake of an even deeper future union.*

**Richard Rohr**, *The Universal Christ*

Now, Lord, through the consecration of the world the luminosity and fragrance which suffuse the universe take on for me the lineaments of a body and a face – in you. What my mind glimpsed through its hesitant explorations, what my heart craved with so little expectation of fulfillment, you now magnificently unfold for me: the fact that your creatures are not merely so linked together in solidarity that none can exist unless all the rest surround it, but that all are so dependent on a single central reality that a true life, borne in common by them all, gives them ultimately their consistence and their unity... I have been brought to the point where I can no longer see anything, nor any longer breathe, outside that *milieu* in which all is made one.

**Telihard de Chardin, SJ**, *The Mass on the World*

### **When I Am Among the Trees**

When I am among the trees,  
especially the willows and the honey locust,  
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,  
they give off such hints of gladness.  
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.

I am so distant from the hope of myself,  
in which I have goodness, and discernment,

and never hurry through the world  
but walk slowly, and bow often.

Around me the trees stir in their leaves  
and call out, "Stay awhile."  
The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, "It's simple," they say,  
"and you too have come  
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled  
with light, and to shine."

### **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.

### **Mornings at Blackwater**

For years, every morning, I drank  
from Blackwater Pond.  
It was flavored with oak leaves and also, no doubt,  
the feet of ducks.

And always it assuaged me  
from the dry bowl of the very far past.

What I want to say is  
that the past is the past,  
and the present is what your life is,

and you are capable  
of choosing what that will be,  
darling citizen.

So come to the pond,  
or the river of your imagination,  
or the harbor of your longing,  
and put your lips to the world.

And live  
your life.”

### **What Makes Us One: Reflections on the Poetry of Mary Oliver - Part 2**

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world. . . .

This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. . . . I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed. . . . But this cannot be seen, only believed and 'understood' by a peculiar gift. **Thomas Merton**, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*

I don't pray for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all may be one, as you Abba, are in me and I in you; I pray that they may be one in us...that they may be one as we are one –I in them, you in me, that they may be made perfect in unity. *John 17:20-23*

Will you continue to pray in union with us that the dear Lord may send his creative word also into this chaos?

**Blessed Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger, SSND**, *Letter to Rev. Father of Paxou*

### **Poem of the One World**

This morning  
the beautiful white heron  
was floating along above the water

and then into the sky of this  
the one world  
we all belong to

where everything  
sooner or later  
is a part of everything else

which thought made me feel  
for a little while  
quite, beautiful, myself.

### **Of the Empire**

We will be known as a culture that feared death and adored power, that tried to vanquish insecurity for the few and cared little for the penury of the many. We will be known as a culture that taught and rewarded the amassing of things, that spoke little if at all about the quality of life for people (other people), for dogs, for rivers. All the world, in our eyes, they will say, was a commodity. And they will say that this structure was held together politically, which it was, and they will say also that our politics was no more than an apparatus to accommodate the feelings of the heart, and that the heart, in those days, was small, and hard, and full of meanness.

### **Whistling Swans**

Do you bow your head when you pray or do you look  
up into that blue space?

Take your choice, prayers fly from all directions.  
And don't worry about what language you use,  
God no doubt understands them all.

Even when the swans are flying north and making  
such a ruckus of noise, God is surely listening  
and understanding.

Rumi said, There is no proof of the soul.  
But isn't the return of spring and how it  
springs up in our hearts a pretty good hint?  
Yes, I know, God's silence never breaks, but is  
that really a problem?

There are thousands of voices, after all.  
And furthermore, don't you imagine (I just suggest it)  
that the swans know as much as we do about  
the whole business?  
So listen to them and watch them, singing as they fly.  
Take from it what you can.

### **The Journey**

One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began,  
though the voices around you  
kept shouting  
their bad advice—  
though the whole house  
began to tremble  
and you felt the old tug  
at your ankles.  
“Mend my life!”  
each voice cried.  
But you didn't stop.  
You knew what you had to do,  
though the wind pried  
with its stiff fingers  
at the very foundations,  
though their melancholy  
was terrible.  
It was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen  
branches and stones.  
But little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice  
which you slowly  
recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do—  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.