

ONE DAY

A homily by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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The poet Mary Oliver died on Thursday at the age of 83. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, Oliver was one of our nation's most deeply-loved and widely-popular poets. Oliver had a difficult childhood — she was sexually abused and suffered from parental neglect — and her poetry consistently acknowledges the difficult and even tragic dimension of life.

In a poem titled “Hallelujah,” she writes:

Everyone should be born into this world happy
and loving everything.
But in truth it rarely works that way.

In a poem titled “Poppies,” she writes:

Of course nothing stops the cold, dark, curved blade
from hooking forward—
of course loss is the great lesson.

But Oliver's poems always contain a counterpoint of promise to soothe the pain. Her poem “Poppies” continues:

But I also say this: that light
is an invitation to happiness,
and that happiness, when it's done right,
is a kind of holiness, palpable and redemptive.

Oliver once watched a grasshopper hop in the grass, feed on some sugar, clean its face, and then float away. Was this a good way to spend a summer day, she wonders? She continues:

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?

Oliver answers her own question in a poem titled, perhaps surprisingly, "A Dream of Trees." She writes, in part:

There is a thing in me that dreamed of trees
A quiet house, some green and modest acres
A little way from every troubling town,
A little way from factories, schools, laments.
I would have time, I thought, and time to spare,
With only streams and birds for company,
To build out of my life a few wild stanzas.
And then it came to me, that so was death,
A little way away from everywhere.

There is a thing in me still dreams of trees.
But let it go. Homesick for moderation,
Half the world's artists shrink or fall away.
If any find solution, let them tell it.
Meanwhile I bend my heart toward lamentation
Where, as the times implore our true involvement,
The blades of every crisis point the way.

On a weekend set aside to celebrate the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Oliver's final lines in this excerpt resonates: "Meanwhile I bend my heart toward lamentation where, as the times implore our true involvement, the blades of every crisis point the way."

In his speeches and writings, Dr. King acknowledged our nation's deep connection to its slavery-based past and its segregation-saturated present. He witnessed the active violence of Southern whites against their black neighbors, as well as the structural violence present throughout the nation in unequal access to education, housing, employment, and other essential opportunities. But he rejected the idea that the horrors of the past and the troubles of the present had spoken the final word. Despite the chasm between our nation's lofty words and its often-destructive deeds, Dr. King saw the promise embedded in our nation's professed ideal of freedom.

Dr. King had a dream of a time when the present troubles had ended and lamentations had ceased. He dreamed that one day our nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed of self-evident equality. He dreamed that one day in Georgia the children of former enslaved people and the children of their former owners

will sit down at the table together in friendship. He dreamed that one day his four little children will live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream, he said, that one day — not today, not tomorrow, and probably not even in my lifetime. But I have a dream that one day these things will come to pass.

“The arc of the moral universe is long,” Dr. King often said, quoting the 19th-century abolitionist and Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, “but it bends toward justice.” Parker was a gifted preacher and writer, a pivotal Transcendentalist thinker, a fierce opponent of slavery, and an early organizer of the Underground Railroad. Though he died in 1860, Parker helped lay the social and intellectual groundwork for the Emancipation Proclamation, which Lincoln penned a few years later.

In 1853, Parker said: “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one.... But from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.” When people hear this soaring sentiment, they usually focus on the optimism of the second half — the part about the moral universe bending toward justice. As I read these words today, I’m struck by the humility and realism of the first half: “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe,” Parker said; “the arc is a long one.”

I agree with Parker and King that the arc of the moral universe is long. I also believe, as they did, that it bends toward justice — but not because something mysterious happens over the horizon, a bending we cannot see and do not understand. Rather, the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice because people bend it — people who have faith in America as a land of freedom, and equality, and opportunity.

“This is the faith that I go back to the South with,” Dr. King said. “With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope... With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.”

What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? Bend your heart toward lamentation. These times implore our true involvement. The blades of every crisis point the way.