

Sermon: To Come Alive
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Chalice Lighting Reading:

Spring

Somewhere

a black bear
has just risen from sleep
and is staring

down the mountain

All night
in the brisk and shallow restlessness
of early spring

I think of her,

her four black fists
flicking the gravel,
her tongue

like a red fire

touching the grass,
the cold water.
There is only one question:

how to love this world.

I think of her
rising
like a black and leafy ledge

to sharpen her claws against

the silence
of the trees.
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;

all day I thinking of her—

her white teeth,

her wordlessness,

her perfect love.

--Mary Oliver, *House of Light*

I'm five years old. I'm standing in a snow-covered field on the Eastern Shore, not far from Dover, Delaware. My family had come to see the snow geese. The geese were feeding in a grain field not far from us. Suddenly the white of snow geese separated from the white of the field and the flock rose into the air and flew right over us—thousands of them filling the sky over our heads. The sound of their wings whistling in the wind, their stark white and black color against the deep blue of the sky, the sharpness of their cries in the cold air; my head thrown back, my mouth open in awe. It is what I identify as my earliest spiritual memory. I had no language for it at the time, but in that moment I knew in my bones something of the depth of wonder in this world, something of the mystery of the more that surrounded me, that awakened me, that invited me. It is my earliest memory of how an experience helped me to come more fully alive.

You know you can study snow geese. You can learn all about their habits and behavior. You can so familiarize yourself with their markings and characteristics that you can tell a snow goose from a Ross's goose through a spotting scope when they are 200 yards away, and that is no small feat; but when several thousand snow geese are covering you with a great flurry of feathers and waves of sound, there is something more going on than can readily be reduced by all of our knowledge.

Mary Oliver has a poem in her recently released 2nd volume *of New and Selected Poems* that gets at this with her unique voice. It is entitled, "What is There Beyond Knowing:"

What is there beyond knowing that keeps
calling to me? I can't

turn in any direction
but it's there. I don't mean

the leaves' grip and shine or even the thrush's

silk song, but the far-off

fires, for example,
of the stars, heaven's slowly turning

theater of light, or the wind
playful with its breath;

or time that's always rushing forward,
or standing still

in the same—what shall I say—
moment.

What I know
I could put into a pack

as if it were bread and cheese, and carry it
on one shoulder,

important and honorable, but so small!
While everything else continues, unexplained

and unexplainable. How wonderful it is
to follow a thought quietly

to its logical end.
I have done this a few times.

But mostly I just stand in the dark field,
in the middle of the world, breathing

in and out. Life so far doesn't have any other name
but breath and light, wind and rain.

If there's a temple, I haven't found it yet.
I simply go on drifting, in the heaven of the grass
and the weeds.

Saint Irenaeus said in the 2nd century, "The glory of God is humanity fully alive."
The work of spiritual guidance is not about stuffing the pack full of knowledge, it is not
intended to steer persons into right doctrine, whatever that is, it is foremost the work of
being with others in a manner that encourages and assists their coming alive.

My first spiritual guides were my parents. My mother tells the story of me
exploring the back yard at an early age. I was in the tall grass when she heard me cry out,

“Mom” “Mom.” She came running thinking at first that I might be hurt, but she found me instead lying in the grass eyeing a spider. She said I looked up with amazement and said, “Mom, this spider has five eyes and they are all purple!” When she told me this story I asked her what she did then, and she said, “Well, of course, I got down in the grass and had a long look at those eyes.” That is the guide’s work, the companion’s work, to honor the awe in the other. Pausing with the other to ponder what awakens wonder, what opens love, what stirs longing. Our aliveness isn’t tied so much to the grand or to our accomplishments or success; it is more aligned to the way we enter the moment, all eyes, all ears, all breath, all heart—hungry and expectant for the more. The poet Denise Levertov said it well in a poem entitled “Something More:”

“With the will to see more than is there, one comes, at moments, to perceive the more that there is: from behind gray curtains of low expectation it is drawn forth, resplendent.”

I was a little older when my father gently guided me in the ways of silence. I remember sitting with him as we leaned against a huge White Pine tree in the woods behind our home. He whispered to me, “If you can be quiet, if you can sit very still, you’ll discover that the creatures around us will not be frightened, will give up their hiding and you will be able to watch them.” We sat still for what seemed like an eternity but then sure enough, a bird made its way down a tree very close to us. It was a brown creeper. I really saw it. The texture and pattern of its brown and white back, the curve of its bill probing this way and that under the bark ledges, its upside-down manner of negotiating the trunk of the tree. I took it all in and I remembered it; and I remembered what my father said about the quiet. Some of the most important work we do in our spiritual lives, with or without a guide, is simply to quiet ourselves. We are full of so much, we are busy with so much, we are so overloaded with information and noise, that we can hardly hear ourselves think much less listen our way to the heart of our life. When we find ways to regularly grow quiet we can go among the noise and yet hear our way to what matters, hear our way to the truth of our self coming-alive in voice and action. Wendell Berry has a practice of writing poems on Sunday. It is his worship, it is his praise and they’ve been collected in a book called *The Timbered Choir*. Here is one of them:

I go among trees and sit still.
All my stirring becomes quiet

around me like circles on water.
My tasks lie in their places
where I left them, asleep like cattle.

Then what is afraid of me comes
and lives a while in my sight.
What it fears in me leaves me,
and the fear of me leaves it.
It sings, and I hear its song.

Then what I am afraid of comes.
I live for a while in its sight.
What I fear in it leaves it,
and the fear of it leaves me.
It sings, and I hear its song.

After days of labor,
mute in my consternations,
I hear my song at last,
and I sing it. As we sing,
the day turns, the trees move.

This is the listening that helps us come alive. When busyness overcomes us, we turn again to the quiet, to the still; it feeds us, it heals our fears, it returns us to sight, it returns us to the depth of listening, it helps us come again to the life before us in each day.

There are times when our coming alive is not triggered by what amazes us or by all our efforts to quiet life and practice listening with meditation or walks among the trees. There are times when opening to our aliveness is awakened by what actually appears as a threat to life – illness, brokenness in relationship, the loss of a job or a home, or even the death of one we love. We suddenly feel stripped, vulnerable, exposed, and our mortality looms before us. Such moments though painful and at times terrifying, break open the shell of our ordinary. Things we have counted on, things we have perhaps even taken for granted, are suddenly shaken or gone. It is precisely at this point that the possibility of new life often stirs under the surface of our suffering. The work of the guide here is

the delicate balance between honoring the grieving and the letting go while holding forth the invitations that can help move the seeking deeper and open the other to transformation.

I wish I had a guide when I was 17 and lost a friend in an automobile accident. Death at that point confronted me with life—its meaning in general but also the question of my life in particular—its meaning and direction. Why was I here? What did I plan to do with “my one wild and precious life?” as Mary Oliver puts it. I didn’t have many answers but it shook me enough that I didn’t return to my life the same. And now with the gift of hindsight I can see how my life bloomed in a different way because of that experience of death.

The summer after that accident I was walking a path in the woods atop Tussey Mountain, about 50 miles south of here, near my home where I spent most of my school years. It was late in the day, the sun was in my face as I walked. I sensed an invitation to close my eyes as I walked and then, after a time, the crazy idea of stepping up my pace to a run. So there I was, at the edge of adulthood, eyes shut, running /“slash”/ stumbling down a narrow path in the woods toward the sun. It was one of those strange moments that somehow felt right and left me very exhilarated and jubilant, but without any real understanding of what had happened. I can see now that in many ways it was a confessional moment. It revealed something of how I wanted to live my life; something of an orientation toward the light, something of an abiding trust in Spirit and the mystery of all I can’t see or understand. And there was something in the aliveness I felt in that blind and sighted moment that I want to cherish **wherever** I encounter it and in **whatever** helps me open to it.

Mary Oliver’s poem, “When Death Comes” speaks of the way even encounters with death can be invitations to our aliveness. I read an abbreviated version:

When death comes...

When it is 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.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.
--New & Selected Poems, Vol. 1

To continue to come alive is to refuse visitor status in this world, is to dive into the mystery again and again, making the connections, trusting the more, leaning into what can't be seen or understood; and in all things finding a path to gratitude that continues to lead us back into life, awake and present to the day. Noting our thanksgiving is so essential to staying with the thread of aliveness. It is gratitude that keeps us intimate with the more and it is gratitude that brings both peace and expectancy to the moment.

I'm forty seven years old—(This was a few years ago!). I'm standing in a snow-covered field on the Eastern Shore, not far from Dover, Delaware. I'd led a retreat nearby that weekend and when it was over I'd come looking for snow geese. When I finally found them the geese were feeding in a grain field not far from me. Suddenly the white of snow geese separated from the white of the field and the flock rose into the air and began to fly away from me and then turned and flew back right over me—hundreds of them filling the sky over my head. The sound of their wings whistling in the wind, their stark white and black color against the deep blue of the sky, the sharpness of their cries in the cold air; my head thrown back, my mouth open in awe. This time though, I went to my knees as I took in the connections that have anchored my life; as I felt the aliveness that shimmered in that moment. In the great stillness that settled over the land in the wake of their passing, I was left with two very wet knees and a grateful heart.

Chalice Extinguishing Reading:

Snow Geese

Oh, to love what is lovely, and will not last!

 What a task
 to ask
of anything, or anyone,

yet it is ours,

 and not by the century or the year, but by the hours.

One fall day I heard

 above me, and above the sting of the wind, a sound
I did not know, and my look shot upwards; it was

a flock of snow geese, winging it
 faster than the ones we usually see,
and, being the color of snow, catching the sun

so they were, in part at least, golden. I

-- -.

held my breath
as we do
sometimes
to stop time
when something wonderful
has touched us

as with a match
which is lit, and bright,
but does not hurt
in the common way,
but delightfully,
as if delight
were the most serious thing
you ever felt.

The geese
flew on.
I have never
seen them again.

Maybe I will, someday, somewhere.
Maybe I won't.
It doesn't matter.

What matters
is that, when I saw them,
I saw them
as through the veil, secretly, joyfully, clearly.
--Why I Wake Early