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## Unraveling Lessons from Mary Oliver

Sarah Audsley

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We should have talked about writing. But writing is already doing the talking, so why talk about talking? The pies, the coffee, and the bright afternoon sun warming us through were all we needed.

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SANDRA SYLVIA NELSON has published widely, including in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Yankee*, *Tar River*, *The North American Review*, *The Iowa Review* and its anthology *Hard Choices*, and *Ms*.

# Unraveling Lessons from Mary Oliver

Sarah Audsley

WINTER IS LONG THIS YEAR: FLURRIES TEST THE LOCALS INTO MAY; the plow guy makes too many visits up and down our long dirt driveway; I gamble taking off my snow tires in late March; on a bad night driving home after a shift at the restaurant, I nearly hit a birch tree fallen across the road, its slim whiteness blending in with the snow curtain. On January 17, 2019, just home after graduating from my MFA program, two and a half years of rigorous study and writing, I call my best friend and sob into the phone. Mary Oliver has died; there is no consoling me. I pull all of her books off my shelf, make a pile on the coffee table, light a candle, and hold vigil. A friend comes over, and we read Mary Oliver's poems out loud to each other, passing numerous collections back and forth. Why do I feel this way? Never have I felt this way about someone I never even met. . . . The candle doesn't comfort, but my friend, who presented me with my first collection, *New and Selected, Volume II*, much loved and dog-eared but somehow misplaced in the many moves from apartment to apartment throughout my 20s, says maybe Oliver is reunited now with her dog, Percy. What I know for certain is this: I have clung to Mary Oliver's words; they have helped me get through rough times,

provided solace. Isn't that the best that poetry can do? The brutal realization is there will never be another new poem from Mary Oliver, not one more book—the available light in my hands is all that she has left us.

It took me a while to get here, but I know now I don't doubt the deep well and power of poetry, even after a memorable dinner, several years ago, with academic types at a prominent university. Sitting at the table, feeling inadequate and as if I don't belong, others begin talking about poets and their work. This is a typical conversation when a gaggle of poets gathers in any sort of critical mass, often in various English departments across the country, or at annual writers' conferences. Everyone has an opinion on the latest poems and books just out. Someone mentions Mary Oliver, and another scoffs, "Well . . . her work doesn't demand very much from the reader." Everyone nods.

Tongue flustered and flabbergasted, I don't know what to do or say. Inside my head, questions swirl. The validity of the argument seems hollow, especially when Mary Oliver's work has meant so much to me, not to mention to all of her thousands (millions?) of readers. At that precise moment I cannot articulate what I understand now: Unequivocally and without hesitation, I can say that I loved her. Perhaps the literati elite—to which she belonged but stood outside of, even after winning many of the top poetry prizes—should listen to some of her lessons again: "Attention without feeling is just reporting. You need empathy. Reporting is for field guides. It's not thought provoking. Attention is the beginning of devotion."<sup>1</sup>

As I have become more committed to my own writing practice, hoping for a fruitful relationship with the blank page but more often than not coming up against the hard wall of myself, I am beginning to understand more fully how committed Mary Oliver was to her craft. Her greatest gift to me is not her many volumes, to which I return frequently, a succor of carefully chosen words and lines, but it is her gift of the exemplary way she lived and sustained a writing practice over the course of a lifetime, which demonstrates to any aspiring poet what might be possible. The possibility of this thing, this pursuit of living a life centered around art, seeing, and paying attention. Still unraveling her many lessons, I rediscover the only thing she desired to arrive at, at the end of her life, was the feeling that "I was a bride married to amazement. / I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms."<sup>2</sup> The question remains: *What is possible?*

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1 "Mary Oliver: Listening to the World," interview by Krista Tippett in *On Being*, February 5, 2015, <https://onbeing.org/programs/mary-oliver-listening-to-the-world-jan2019/>.

2 Mary Oliver, "When Death Comes," *New & Selected Poems: Volume One* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992).



*May snow in New Hampshire's Franconia Notch: In the long winter of 2019, Sarah Audsley considered Mary Oliver's committed writing practice.* SARAH AUDSLEY

At my desk, I'm flipping through my Mary Oliver library looking for her poem, the one that rises to the surface of my memory, about a speaker who receives a seed found in bear scat from a friend who knew she would admire it. Perhaps the friend never suspected just how much. The speaker takes the seed home and swallows it; lets what passed through a bear also pass through her. I cannot find the poem. I text my friend, who can't remember it, and I am agitated, pacing the room. Did I *dream* this poem? It represents such a striking confessional moment, a taking of an object from the natural world inside oneself, that even having read it years ago, its mystery, its strangeness, and the quality of the speaker telling me something about herself, some truth, preoccupies me. Finally, after desperately searching for it—this poem feels like the key to unlocking this very piece I have been asked to write—I find it in *Swan* (Beacon Press, 2010). The lines seem sparser than I remember, but

the affecting nature of the idea, and this moment of clarity Oliver captures, still strikes me as representative of how she strived to practice “living an examined life.”<sup>3</sup>

I took it home

and did what I supposed  
he was sure I would do—  
I ate it,  
thinking

how it had traveled  
through that rough  
and holy body.  
It was crisp and sweet.<sup>4</sup>

In a rare interview, Mary Oliver professed, “I wanted the ‘I’ to be the possible reader rather than about myself. It was about an experience that happened to be mine, but could well have been anybody else’s. . . . It enjoined the reader with the experience of the poem.”<sup>5</sup> Listening to these words, especially after her death, validates my attraction to poetry that employs clear, fully embodied speakers.

In my own work, I am considering how to carefully craft the “I” in poems for my first poetry collection. As a Korean American transracial adoptee, raised in rural Vermont, now making my home and a living in northern New England, I look different and navigate questions from strangers asking where I am from, among many other assumptions and stereotypes. The extent to which I experience internalized racism is still something I am coming to terms with. It is like awaking slowly from a deep sleep, where the dream is just below the surface, just out of reach and unobtainable in the fully conscious state.

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<sup>3</sup> “The unexamined life is not worth living,” has been attributed to Socrates.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Oliver, “Tom Dancer’s Gift of a Whitebark Pine Cone,” *Swan* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> From *On Being* interview with Mary Oliver, by Krista Tippett.

Turning to Mary Oliver's poems has always reminded me that where I am from and where I *belong* is walking in the woods, roaming in the mountains, swimming in the lakes and streams. (The woods do not speak the vernacular of microaggressions.) Mary Oliver taught me that rambling in the woods is working. She taught me, "Joy is not made to be a crumb."<sup>6</sup> The lessons I learned from Mary Oliver's life, and work, continue to be touchstones that I will hold on to tightly when I doubt myself as a poet, and as a person. I imagine letting them pass through me, internalizing her gifts, and letting the next poem, the one that has yet to be written, arrive like a seed passing through the body.

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SARAH AUDSLEY currently lives and works at the Vermont Studio Center and previously lived in New Hampshire's White Mountains region. She published poetry in *Alpinist 65* and received a residency at the Banff Centre Writing Studio. She holds a degree in poetry from the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College in North Carolina.

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Oliver, "Don't Hesitate," *Swan* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2010).