

Remembering Mary Oliver

by Eunie Alsaker

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.

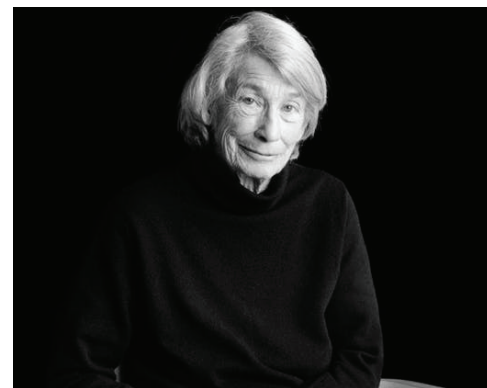


Photo by Mariana Cook

“Often poetry is a gate to a new life.” (Dream Work, Introduction) The gate opened for us on a winter evening in 1996 when Aunt Trudie read aloud Mary Oliver’s “Wild Geese.” It was Trudie’s tradition to read a poem or two before serving food. She was wise in that way—recognizing our need for more than food to nourish us. Trudie felt and understood our discontent living in a part of the country mismatched to our upper Midwest roots. Yet, in typical Trudie style, she didn’t tell us what to do. She knew well the power of poetry and so offered words that would circle back to us many times that year, infusing our thoughts until it became clear where our hearts were leading us.

Freeing ourselves from the “shoulds” of following the expected “pay-your-dues” path to professional success, we packed up and headed in the life-affirming direction of home. We eagerly anticipated many more wine and poetry dinners with Aunt Trudie. We shared one, maybe two, before cancer became her focus, and she died at age 51. “Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?” (“Summer Day”) Trudie was mentor to many, including us, and the glue of the extended family. She was to be an important role-model for our young sons. What was to become of us?

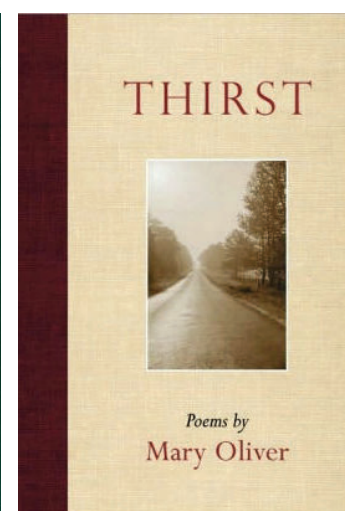
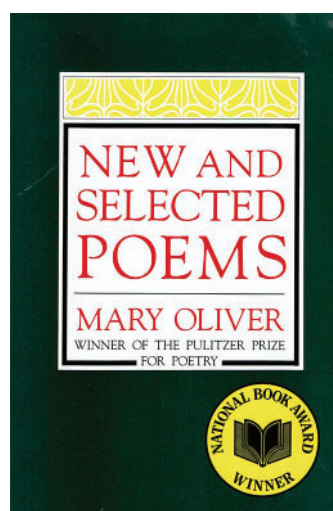
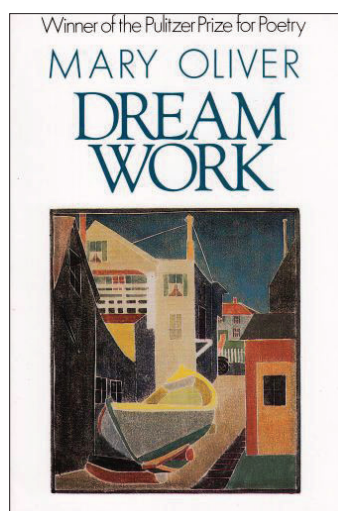
Mary Oliver’s death this winter evoked this memory of our introduction to the poet, as well as the many more recent times we have turned to her words. There have been more losses, of course, some world-rocking, others more expected, and each time we found something of comfort or encouragement in Oliver’s poems. “It’s not the weight you carry but how you carry it—books, bricks, grief—it’s all in the way you embrace it, balance

it, carry it when you cannot, and would not, put it down.” (“Heavy”)

Oliver speaks to our times of grief and loss for so many reasons. She practiced fervent observation and lived fully aware of the brevity of this life. Nature was her primary teacher, where the cycles of life and the untroubled quality of animals played out matter-of-factly. “Ah, world, what lessons you prepare for us...” (“Starlings in Winter”) She showed us how to look with fresh eyes at things we have seen hundreds of times, to catch the wonder in the ordinary.

In her poems, she examined grief without flinching and even welcomed the darkness. “Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness. It took me years to understand that this, too, was a gift.” (“The Uses of Sorrow”) During times of despair, it is easy to only see the destruction around us. We need reminders that the world is still good, still worthy of our respect, care, and notice. We need reminders of those solid and unchanging places where lifelines remain.

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Oliver understood this and encouraged us to look for joy in the midst of this darkness. She knew it was not an either/or situation. “Every day I see or hear something that more or less kills me with delight.” (“Mindful”) She taught us to look for the beautiful, which does not take grief away but gives us a moment of pause. “It is what I was born for-to look, to listen, to lose myself inside this soft world-to instruct myself over and over in joy and acclimation.” (“Mindful”) She inspired us to live life wide-awake and with intention. “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” (“Summer Day”)

Thank you, Mary Oliver, for your life’s work which challenged us to notice the sacredness in everyday life, to walk with reverence while facing beauty as well as gut-wrenching sorrow. Thank you for teaching us how to look at the world with gratitude. Thank you, Aunt Trudie, for showing us the power of words and helping us learn to live our values, for being keeper of the stories, for sharing your quick laughter, and for showing us what it looks like to live and die with fullness and grace. Lives lived generously do not vanish, they offer their gifts again and again. The connections remain. “Maybe death isn’t darkness, after all, but so much light wrapping itself around us...” (“White Owl Flies Into and Out of the Field”)

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.

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.
(“When Death Comes”)

Selected Works

Oliver, M. J. (1986) *Dream Work*. New York, NY: The Atlantic Monthly Press.

Oliver, M. J. (1992) *New and Selected Poems*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Oliver, M. J. (2006) *Thirst*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.