

Wild Geese – by Mary Oliver

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.



As we try to reimagine life for ourselves, for our country, for our world, we may be tempted to judge ourselves by what we think we “should be doing.” A strong ethical stance is certainly in short supply, so let’s not overlook how important it is to be truly “good” for the world, to make promises we can keep, and to offer the best of ourselves to others. Mary Oliver is reminding us that the coherence we seek for our life lies deeply within each one of us. Meaning, purpose in life, a sense of our destiny can be known in listening to and loving what we intrinsically value, what deeply moves us, or what resonates with our place in the natural order. Too often we reject our deepest knowing of what we love and place our sights on what the conventional social wisdom instructs us to value. We strive to live up to those expectations only to discover something vital is missing. As you reimagine your life take time to be with yourself, to allow yourself to love “what the soft animal of your body loves.” Try walking with that love in your step; try dancing to its music; play with the sound of voice when you greet others from that place of your loving what your truly love. Oliver suggests that when we do this, we might let go of our despair, let our life move along to where we discover again that we truly belong here ‘in the family of things.’”