

**The Pond We Live In:  
Pope Francis and Mary Oliver**

Rev. Alan Claassen

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**The World Has Need of You**

Ellen Bass

*everything here  
seems to need us*

– Rainer Maria Rilke

I can hardly imagine it  
as I walk to the lighthouse, feeling the ancient  
prayer of my arms swinging  
in counterpoint to my feet.  
Here I am, suspended  
between the sidewalk and twilight,  
the sky dimming so fast it seems alive.  
What if you felt the invisible  
tug between you and everything?  
A boy on a bicycle rides by,  
his white shirt open, flaring  
behind him like wings.  
It's a hard time to be human. We know too much  
and too little. Does the breeze need us?  
The cliffs? The gulls?  
If you've managed to do one good thing,  
the ocean doesn't care.  
But when Newton's apple fell toward the earth,  
the earth, ever so slightly, fell  
toward the apple.

### **Scripture reading:**

Acts 4: 32-35

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

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In honor of Earth Day, the March for Science that took place around the world yesterday, and the Climate Change March that will take place next weekend, *and* the fact that April is Poetry Month, I would like to bring together the words of Pope Francis and Poet Mary – Mary Oliver, that is.

The words of Pope Francis will come from his encyclical on the environment, called *Laudato Si, Praise to the Lord, On Care for our Common Home*. The words of Mary Oliver will come from her poems “Starfish,” “The Turtle,” and “Goldenrod.”

### **Pope Francis**

In his encyclical, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis reminds us that Saint Francis called all creatures, no matter how small, by the name of “brother” or “sister.” Pope Francis writes that this conviction

cannot be written off as naïve romanticism, for it affects the choices which determine our behavior. If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs.

By contrast, if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously. The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object to be used and controlled. (*Laudato Si*, Introduction, 11.)

### **Mary Oliver**

This intimate relationship with nature is beautifully expressed in Mary Oliver’s poem, “Starfish.”

## Starfish

In the sea rocks,  
in the stone pockets  
under the tide's lip,  
in water dense as blindness

they slid  
like sponges,  
like too many thumbs.  
I knew this, and what I wanted

was to draw my hands back  
from the water – what I wanted  
was to be willing  
to be afraid.

But I stayed there,  
I crouched on the stone wall  
while the sea poured its harsh song  
through the sluices,

while I waited for the gritty lightning  
of their touch, while I stared  
down through the tide's leaving  
where sometimes I could see them –

their stubborn flesh  
lounging on my knuckles.  
What good does it do  
to lie all day in the sun

loving what is easy?  
It never grew easy,  
but at last I grew peaceful:  
all summer

my fear diminished  
as they bloomed through the water  
like flowers, like flecks  
of an uncertain dream,

while I lay on the rocks, reaching  
into the darkness, learning  
little by little to love  
our only world.

## Alan's Reflection

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We hear something like this expressed in Psalm 150:6: "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!" sings the Psalmist (Psalm 150:6). From the music of the planets spinning deep in space, to the silent beauty of the starfish in the tide pools, to the trills of the thrushes deep in the forests, all creation praises the maker. We care for fellow creatures so that they, with us, can continue to sing God's praises.

The Creator/Creating has given human beings a special responsibility to care for creation. We are to nurture, sustain, and care for creation the way God nurtures, sustains, and cares for us. We hear this responsibility expressed in Psalm 24:1 "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof!" The earth is not ours; it belongs to the Creator. And we share it, not just with other human beings, but with all of God's creation: the sea stars in the tide pools, the refugees from Syria, those who suffer in poverty, and those who bear the responsibility of wealth, and the children of our children's children.

The Pope intends that his encyclical on the environment to be a forthright and honest ongoing dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. His goal is to include everyone in consideration and conversation, since the environmental changes affect us all, and the poor in particular. This may be the center of Pope Francis's message in *Laudato Si*,

## Pope Francis

What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up? Unless we struggle with these deeper issues, I do not believe that our concern for ecology will produce significant results.

But if these issues are courageously faced, we are led inexorably to ask other pointed questions: What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts? What need does the earth have of us? It is no longer enough, then, simply to state that we should be concerned for future generations. We need to see that what is at stake is our own dignity... (Chapter 4,160)

## Alan's Reflection

What is the purpose of our life? What is our role in creation? What is our source of dignity? What does the earth need of us? Perhaps we can learn something about that from a turtle such as the one that Mary Oliver writes about in her poem, "The Turtle." Here are some excerpts from her poem.

### Mary Oliver

#### The Turtle

breaks from the blue-black  
skin of the water...  
to dig with her ungainly feet  
a nest...  
and you think  
of her patience, her fortitude,  
her determination to complete  
what she was born to do –  
and then you realize a greater thing –  
she doesn't consider  
what she was born to do.  
She's only filled  
with an old blind wish.  
It isn't even hers but came to her  
in the rain or the soft wind  
which is a gate through which her life keeps walking.  
She can't see  
herself apart from the rest of the world  
or the world from what she must do  
every spring.  
Crawling up the high hill,  
luminous under the sand that has packed against her skin,  
she doesn't dream  
she knows  
she is a part of the pond she lives in,  
the tall trees are her children,  
the birds that swim above her  
are tied to her by an unbreakable string.

## Alan's Reflection

She can't see  
herself apart from the rest of the world  
...  
she knows  
she is a part of the pond she lives in.

In this morning's scripture reading from the Book of Acts, which takes place right after Peter's Pentecost sermon where thousands listened to him and joined this new movement, these new disciples devoted themselves to the teachings and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And what was the result of this study, this fellowship, this breaking of the bread and prayers? Great grace, awe, came upon everyone. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all as they had need.

Mary Oliver's poem "Goldenrod" is a celebration of the grace that abounds in creation and that delights in giving itself away. I would like to read the closing section of this poem.

## Mary Oliver

For myself,  
I was just passing by, when the wind flared  
and the blossoms rustled,  
and the glittering pandemonium  
leaned on me.  
I was just minding my own business  
when I found myself on their straw hillsides,  
citron and butter-colored,  
and was happy, and why not?  
Are not the difficult labors of our lives  
full of dark hours?  
And what has consciousness come to anyway, so far,  
that is better than these light-filled bodies?  
All day  
on their airy backbones  
they toss in the wind,  
they bend as though it was natural and godly to bend,  
they rise in a stiff sweetness,  
in the pure peace of giving  
one's gold away.

## Alan's Reflection

they bend as though it was natural and godly to bend,  
they rise in a stiff sweetness,  
in the pure peace of giving  
one's gold away.

This moment, when the earth's health is in danger and our economic structures are collapsing may be a Good Friday moment for us a civilization. We may be able to see what we have done wrong as human beings exploiting the planet and take an evolutionary step out of the tomb and forward into a consciousness that deeply understands what it means to share all things in common.

As the turtle knows, we need to know the part of the pond that we live in.

As the goldenrod knows, we need to know how to give our treasures away.

As the starfish knows, we need to know how to love our only world.

And as the early church knew, the earth is the Lord's, and great grace leads us to our spiritual nature, where all things are shared in common.

We who believe these things are called at this time, as never before, to rise to the occasion and act with compassion and imagination, to tell the truth based on science, and to live the truth based on compassion.

The earth has need of us.

Amen.