

A Summer Day
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Mary Oliver's poem, *A Summer Day*, ends with the line, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" I've heard that line quoted often, and in the first instances, without the larger context of the full poem. While I liked the idea of a wild and precious life, I found myself reacting negatively to the urgency of "what is it you plan to do" phrase. It felt like a lot of pressure. Pressure to do, pressure to achieve, pressure to accomplish – something. And then, I read the poem. And my whole impression of the question changed. There is a lesson in that, isn't there? Context does matter. Because in the poem, the detailed description Oliver offers of the grasshopper, as one whose jaws move sideways, one with complicated eyes, and arms that wash a face – in the poem – we know that no one, except perhaps the grasshopper, is rushing off to accomplish some great thing.

Oliver spends nearly half the poem describing a single grasshopper. Think about that. Most of us would barely notice one. If we did, it would likely be because it jumped in front of us on the sidewalk. We would step over it and continue on our way. Oliver kneels. She watches. She notices that its jaws move sideways. She notices its enormous, complicated eyes. She notices it lifting its pale forearms to wash its face. Nothing "important" happens. No great revelation descends from heaven. The miracle is that she pays attention long enough for the ordinary to become extraordinary.

I wonder how many miracles we miss simply because we are in a hurry.

Oliver reminds us that taking the time; to kneel in the grass, to be idle and blessed, is holy work, leaving her, by my reading at least, with deep gratitude for her finite life. The other question Oliver asks, one that we all live with is, "Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?"

After all, we human animals navigate the world with an awareness of our own mortality. It is a terrifying awareness and yet... and yet... Psychiatrist Irving Yalom wrote "Although the physicality of death destroys us, the idea of death may save us.", suggesting that awareness of mortality can lead us to live more authentically and appreciate life more deeply. But we don't become aware of mortality or of the preciousness of life in philosophy classes, or sermons - We discover it as children, when our goldfish dies, we come to it again, as adults in hospital rooms. At funerals. When a friend receives a diagnosis. When we realize our children are suddenly adults. When we hear a favourite song and remember someone who is no longer here to hear it with us.

We don't need reminders that life is fragile. Life provides those reminders on its own.

The question is what we do with that knowledge.

Living with an awareness of our mortality, our vulnerability, and with the capacity to reflect is at times too much, too hard, too terrible. But we are also an animal who can understand a stroll through the fields as holy, as prayer. And as Yalom and others have reflected, the tension that results from our awareness is also the reason why we sometimes find ourselves awe struck by a bee on a flower, or a grasshopper or the sound of a loon. If we didn't know that 'everything died, at last, and too soon', we wouldn't feel the urgency to see the grasshopper, or listen to the loon, that we sometimes do. Those moments when I do hit pause are the ones that make me feel as if my heart is simultaneously full and tender and breaking.

Poets and wise ones have long reminded us that taking the moment to stop and pay attention, is a powerful tool; one that helps us invite gratitude into our lives, even as it helps us reset our relationships – all of them.

Consider if you will these often-cited sources –

In the Hebrew Scriptures, Psalm, referred to as Tehillim, in Jewish context, 23 reads,

"The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want, He causes me to lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul."

He restores my soul. Isn't that what we long for, isn't that what we need?

Notice that the psalm doesn't say, "He restores my soul while I am checking one more email." It doesn't say restoration happens in the marketplace or on the boardroom. It happens beside still waters.

Ancient shepherds knew something practical: sheep will not drink from rushing water. They need calm water to feel safe enough to drink. Perhaps we are not so different. We too need places where our nervous systems can settle, where our breathing slows, where we remember that we are more than what we produce. And yet, we often rush past the green pastures, even the small one in the city park we pass as we move through our days.

Walt Whitman's, poem 'Song of Myself' reads:

I loafe and invite my soul,

I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

And moves to this:

Hoping to cease not till death.

I love that phrase: "invite my soul." Whitman doesn't command his soul. He doesn't organize it, optimize it, or schedule it. He invites it. Invitations cannot be rushed. They require space. I suspect many of us have had days when our bodies arrived everywhere we were supposed to be, but our souls never quite caught up.

For generations, spiritual teachers urged us to be still, to rest, to notice the lilies of the field, to keep Sabbath, to breathe. Today, neuroscience is catching up. Brain scans show that mindfulness changes the brain. Medical studies demonstrate that meditation reduces anxiety and depression. Time in nature lowers stress. Rest improves memory, creativity, and emotional resilience. What the mystics intuited, science increasingly confirms: human beings are not designed for constant striving. We flourish when our lives include rhythms of work and rest, attention and stillness.

There is a growing body of scientific research that offers proof of the lessons that poets and psalmists have been telling us. Regular periods of rest, mindfulness, and quiet reflection have measurable benefits for physical and mental health.

Studies have shown that mindfulness has many benefits, including, reduced stress, reductions in symptoms of anxiety and depression, pain management and overall quality of life. And in a 2011 study it was shown that an eight-week mindfulness program resulted in measurable changes in the parts of our brains that are associated with learning, memory, emotional regulation and perspective. We don't just invite and restore our souls; we change our brains.

But back to the poets... They offered more instruction on how we might navigate this business of being alive, and knowing we have expiry dates...

We know of course, our lives are finite and precious. This being alive, as a human, is bittersweet business. We live in a world in which work is required if we are to be fed, housed and clothed. Rest is sometimes elusive, sometimes impossible. And yet, rest has the capacity to change our relationships – with the natural world, with other people, with ourselves.

Perhaps that's why summer has always carried a kind of spiritual invitation. We sit a little longer on the porch. We watch fireflies. We listen to loons across a lake. We linger over conversations that would be hurried in November. We discover, if only briefly, that the world keeps turning even when we stop moving quite so fast.

Maybe those moments are not interruptions to life.

Maybe they are the moments in which we most fully inhabit it.

Green pastures, still waters, a spear of grass, kneeling in the grass and strolling through the fields.

Maybe they are the moments in which we most fully inhabit our lives, in which we can ground ourselves – quite literally – so that we understand ourselves, most fully as part of the interdependent web. Science reinforces this. We are able to more fully inhabit our lives when we can walk in nature. Studies have shown that a 90-minute walk in nature lowered rumination, reduced activity in brain regions that are linked to depression and improved emotional well-being.

There is ample evidence and wisdom that point us in a direction... We know this. And if all of this is true, why don't we do it?"

One of the obstacles, I think, is the reality that we have bills to pay, jobs to attend to, people and relationships that require our attention. Also, I think in our culture we have sometimes confused being busy with being important.

Have you noticed how often the answer to the question, "How are you?" is simply, "Busy."

Busy has become a badge of honour. It suggests we are needed, productive, engaged. There is, of course, nothing wrong with work. It is a necessary reality for many. And work can be meaningful. There is satisfaction in caring for children, tending gardens, volunteering in our communities, earning a living, making meals, showing up for one another. Work is part of what gives shape and purpose to our days.

The problem comes when busyness ceases to be something we do and becomes who we are.

Somewhere along the way, many of us absorbed the idea that our value lies in our usefulness. If we are resting, perhaps we should be folding laundry. If we are sitting on the porch, perhaps we should be weeding the garden. If we are watching the birds at the feeder, perhaps we should be answering one more email.

The voice is familiar, isn't it?

It whispers that we have not done enough.

That we are not enough.

It is a demanding voice, and unlike Mary Oliver's grasshopper, it never seems to rest.

Perhaps that is why Sabbath traditions have always seemed so challenging to me. They insist that there is one day—or one afternoon, or one hour—in which we refuse to measure ourselves by our productivity.

Sabbath reminds us that we are human beings before we are human doings. That is not laziness. It is resistance. Resistance to a culture that would gladly consume every waking moment of our attention. Resistance to the idea that our worth depends upon our output. Resistance to the illusion that if we just work a little harder, hurry a little faster, accomplish one more thing, we will finally arrive at the life we have been postponing.

The truth, I suspect, is much simpler and much more challenging.

Life is not waiting for us somewhere in the future.

It is happening now... It is happening now, and the reality is, that spending a day beside still water, or watching a grasshopper is as challenging as anything else we can imagine. You might be thinking, "Sure Linda, I hear you, Go outside. Look at nature." But what happens when we *can't*? What happens when someone is homebound? Or grieving? Or working two jobs? Or caring for a spouse with dementia?

This week, many of us looked outside and discovered that the very thing I have been inviting you to do—go outside, take a walk, sit beside the pond, listen to the birds—wasn't possible. The air itself reminded us that the world is not always welcoming. Sometimes creation is beautiful, and sometimes it is burning.

Does that mean mindfulness must wait for clearer skies?

Thich Nhat Hanh would say no and remind us that mindfulness is not dependent upon the weather. It is the practice of returning to this moment, whatever this moment contains.

One of his most famous teachings comes from *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. He tells the story of washing dishes. The point of washing dishes is not simply to have clean dishes. It is to **wash the dishes**. To be fully present to the warm water, the soap, the movements of your hands. If your mind is already thinking about the cup of tea you'll have afterward, you are missing your life while it is happening.

Oliver kneels in the grass. Whitman loafs as he observes a spear of grass. And Thich Nhat Hanh washes the dishes.

They are not trying to get somewhere else. They are reminding us that it is possible to pause, and be. We may have our hands in the sink, we may be resting beside still water. Sure, a piece of nature might make it easier to cultivate mindfulness, and

gratitude and well being. Mindfulness is not dependent upon the weather. It is the practice of returning to this moment, whatever this moment contains.

We are mortal. We know that everything dies, and too soon. We can lament that or we can remember that we have this moment. We can pay attention to this moment. Turning to what is in front of us, whether it is the grasshopper, the breeze in the trees, or the beautiful and fragile world. Paying attention is not turning away from relationships or the world.

It is turning toward them. We cannot love what we refuse to notice. We cannot grieve what is being lost if we have never learned to cherish it. We are interconnected. We talk about that. But mindfulness helps us really understand that.

A fire hundreds of kilometres away changes the air we breathe, and we understand our connection to the people, the trees, the animals most directly affected. This isn't just theology, it is reality.

There are moments, aren't there? Some arrive gently, on the breeze, like the sound of loons on the lake, and make us almost weep with appreciation. Others announce themselves with urgency, like the orange noon day sun I saw earlier this week, making us weep with sadness and outrage.

Mary Oliver asks,

"Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

I don't think she is asking us to become famous.

I don't think she is asking us to become endlessly productive.

I wonder if she is asking something much quieter.

Will you be here for it?

Will you notice it?

Will you let yourself be astonished by it?

Will you love it enough to grieve what is being lost?

Will you love it enough to protect what remains?

Will you allow yourself, now and then, to be led beside still waters...

to loaf and invite your soul...

to wash the dishes...

to listen for the loon...

to kneel beside the grasshopper...

Because perhaps the first thing we do with our one wild and precious life... is simply to be fully present for it.

Let us take a few deep breaths in silent reflection