

# The Art of Paying Attention: Poetry and Practices

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## Poems and Excerpts by Mary Oliver

“Instructions for living a life: Pay attention, be astonished, tell about it.”

Questions for group discussion:

- What resonates with you in this poem?
- What questions does this poem bring up for you?
- How does Mary Oliver define paying attention in this poem?
- What experiences have you had with astonishment, or awe, and how might you see experiences such as that as a prayer practice?
- How might you incorporate intentional practices of paying attention into your daily life?

### 1. Yes! No!

How necessary it is to have opinions! I think the spotted trout lilies are satisfied, standing a few inches above the earth. I think serenity is not something you just find in the world, like a plum tree, holding up its white petals.

The violets, along the river, are opening their blue faces, like small dark lanterns.

The green mosses, being so many, are as good as brawny.

How important it is to walk along, not in haste but slowly, looking at everything and calling out

Yes! No! The

swan, for all his pomp, his robes of grass and petals, wants only to be allowed to live on the nameless pond. The catbrier is without fault. The water thrushes, down among the sloppy rocks, are going crazy with happiness. Imagination is better than a sharp instrument. To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work.

## **2. When Death Comes**

When death comes  
like the hungry bear in autumn;  
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse  
to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;  
when death comes  
like the measles-pox  
when death comes  
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,  
I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:  
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?  
And therefore I look upon everything  
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,  
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,  
and I consider eternity as another possibility,  
and I think of each life as a flower, as common  
as a field daisy, and as singular,  
and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,  
tending, as all music does, toward silence,  
and each body a lion of courage, and something  
precious to the earth.  
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.

## **3. From the Book of Time**

### **1.**

I rose this morning early as usual, and went to my desk  
But it's spring,

and the thrush is in the woods,  
somewhere in the twirled branches, and he is singing.

And so, now, I am standing by the open door.  
And now I am stepping down onto the grass.

I am touching a few leaves.  
I am noticing the way the yellow butterflies  
move together, in a twinkling cloud, over the field.  
And I am thinking: maybe just looking and listening  
is the real work.

Maybe the world, without us,  
is the real poem.

#### **4. The Summer Day**

Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean-  
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
With your one wild and precious life?

#### **5. Flare**

12.  
When loneliness comes stalking, go into the fields, consider  
the orderliness of the world. Notice  
something you have never noticed before,

like the tambourine sound of the snow-cricket  
whose pale green body is no longer than your thumb.

Stare hard at the hummingbird, in the summer rain,  
shaking the water-sparks from its wings.

Let grief be your sister, she will whether or no.  
Rise up from the stump of sorrow, and be green also,  
like the diligent leaves.

A lifetime isn't long enough for the beauty of this world  
and the responsibilities of your life.

Scatter your flowers over the graves, and walk away.  
Be good-natured and untidy in your exuberance.

In the glare of your mind, be modest.  
And beholden to what is tactile, and thrilling.

Live with the beetle, and the wind.

This is the dark bread of the poem.  
This is the dark and nourishing bread of the poem.

## **6. Praying**

It doesn't have to be  
the blue iris, it could be  
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few  
small stones; just  
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don't try  
to make them elaborate, this isn't  
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which  
another voice may speak.