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Mary Oliver: *Wild Geese*

IMAGINATION III: Taking Time to Look

For two weeks I have been talking about the imagination – that distinctly human faculty that makes time and space travelers out of all of us. We can close our eyes and become mental stowaways – what the airline industry calls “un-ticketed travelers.” Moving at light speed in the cyberspace of the mind, we can not only go anyplace we want without moving, but we can do something even more important – we can journey into the heart of another human being.

I began the series by saying that the essential premise of the gospel is that we are locked into a prison of sorts, a prison of self, and that the empathic imagination is the key that can unlock the door and set us free. In fact, the same premise is assumed in the words of Jesus when he says, *You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free*. Liberation presumes bondage, and the empathic imagination is the key that can unlock the door of that prison and set us free. Without it, we are left to stare at the world from a distance.

We can feel pity, we can “mean well,” we can offer our opinions about what’s wrong with people and what’s good for people, and how they can get their act together. But we will never really know what it’s like to be the “other.”

I’ve also said that children seem to have this gift in abundance, but are taught to regard it with some suspicion as they grow older. We often say, of a child’s visions, “Now, now. . .that’s *only* your imagination.” Of course it is, and that’s the way God speaks to us, says Joan of Arc. In the Lewis Carroll classic, *Through the Looking Glass*, the White Queen advises Alice to practice believing six impossible things before breakfast. Sometimes what we dismiss as impossible only seems that way because we just “can’t imagine.”

Lucky for us, the Bible was written before television, and poets like Mary Oliver are still at

work, teaching us to imagine. Do you remember the story of Jacob, whose name means “go getter,” and who achieved his wealth as so many do through deception? He stole a blessing from his blind father that was meant for his brother Esau, and then ran off to conquer the world. He does quite nicely, and becomes fabulously rich. The only problem is, he’s miserably unhappy, because all is not well with his soul.

One night, just before he has to see his brother again for the first time in 20 years, he has a vision in which he is wrestling with an angel, and then at a place called Bethel, he sees a ladder sent down to earth on which the angels of heaven were climbing up and down.

You may have noticed in the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament, prophets are always seeing things that *connect* heaven and earth, ladders, spinning wheels, winged creatures speeding back and forth. But I think the imagination can be understood no other way – it’s the essential *link* between what is possible; what is beyond ordinary sight, what isn’t yet but might be; what the heart yearns for because only the heart can see it. Some people look up at a flock of wild geese moving over and see nothing but a flock of birds. Mary Oliver sees something “harsh and exciting — over and over announcing your place in the family of things.”

Every semester, I burden my students with E.M. Forester’s life motto: *only connect*. It’s the reason that I require a journal in many of my classes, to see if my students can connect the class to their everyday lives, or if we are dealing only in short-term memory in the service of soon-forgotten examinations.

We have new words to describe what we think is a new human activity, like “multi-tasking.” In fact, mothers have been doing that since the dawn of time. And then there’s “networking” – the spirit has done this without cell phones. And the World Wide Web? God invented it, and it’s called the universe.

Imagination works in all the tenses by the way. We imagine some things that *have been* for memory, some things that *are* for amazement, and other things that *might be*, lest we lose hope. But there is one very important requirement for the development of the imagination. You have to make time for it, and you have to feed it or it begins to wither.

In our culture, where accomplishments are so highly valued, and that so often means making money in order to prove that you are successful, we feel guilty if we are simply dreaming, as if creative activity is suspect because it is not legal tender.

Sometimes, in fact, I think people “keep moving” in order not to be “moved in on.” If they slowed down for just a moment, they might start asking themselves some very important

questions about what their life is all about, anyway. They might even start imagining a different one. Remember the ancient advice from the Hebrews about the beginning of all spirituality: *be still, and know that I am God.*

Barbara Brown Taylor, my favorite Episcopal priest, put it this way:

We are all dreamers, but dreamers have fallen upon hard times. . . We belong to a people whose sense of reality is much more limited. We have been schooled in science and philosophy; we have learned to trust what we can handle and prove. We have been taught to think, not to dream, and we have lived long enough to watch many of our dreams die hard. Only saints and children still believe their dreams will come true. The rest of us are adults who know the difference between fact and fantasy. Our dreams rise to our lips and we tamp them down again, remembering how often we have been disappointed by them, reminding ourselves that there is real work to be done in the real world where dreams cannot bandage a wound or buy a loaf of bread.

So we give ourselves to that work, many of us finding real satisfaction in it. We put in long hours. We keep good records and produce measurable results: fifteen telephone calls returned, twelve more initiated, eighteen letters written for two new accounts this week; four car pools executed, six loads of laundry done, eight bags of groceries brought in under the food budget. These are facts, not fantasy. You can add them up and write them down and put them under your pillow at night when you limp home from another twelve hour day and fall exhausted into your bed, a refugee of your own wrecked economy.

A few years ago, when he was still a boy, I build a tree house for Cass. At least I told myself it was for Cass. The truth is I built it in part to hang on to my own childhood, because I was a big fan of tree houses when I was a boy. I never liked the simple platform on a tree branch version either, mind you, but the kind that wrapped itself around multiple branches, had multiple stories with trap doors and secret rooms.

In a few months I will attend my 40th high school reunion, and there I will be reunited with a kid from my old neighborhood named Bill Powell with whom I built these exotic tree houses. Ironically, he became a home builder. When I got a message from him on Facebook, he said, “Robin, my old tree-houses building friend, it will be good to see you at the reunion. Bring your hammer and that overactive imagination of yours.”

The tree house I built for Cass has been mostly idle, and waits now for grandchildren to start the cycle over again. We all love to be in a tree house for the same reason we like to be up on a roof — it changes your perspective on the world, perched up there, seeing without being

seen.

In just a few weeks, my family will observe one of its more bizarre traditions, our evening meal on the roof for the summer solstice. We take all our dishes up there, silverware, a bottle of wine, and spread out a blanket, and we eat on the roof — remembering that the summer solstice was not just a interesting date on the calendar when the sun ruled the sky, but a celebration of our dependence on it for all life. I don't know what the neighbors think. We've lived there 25 years, so I suspect that it's no big deal. "Look the Meyers are eating on their roof." Cass has a hard time explaining it to his friends. My parents are weird.

But as we all know from the song, *Up on the Roof*, if you want to forget the cares of the day, go up there. As a kid you could watch people come and go without having to engage them in conversation. You could make secret plans to ambush them. You could take a sandwich up into the tree, and for some reason, everything tastes better than it does on the ground, and you could even spend the night up there, provided you're not a sleep walker.

In a tree house, you can study tree bark up close and personal, and feel something of what it must be like to be a bird who makes a nest up high, away from cats and dogs, those plebeian creatures who crawl beneath you.

Plus, a few hours spent in a tree house with a child counts for more than a half dozen video games. In fact, the secret to spending so-called "quality time" with children turns out to be doing something that the *child* wants to do, rather than something you want the child to do. Nobody knew this better than Fred Rogers, better known as Mr. Rogers, who lived in the neighborhood of make-believe and was the only gentle-man that millions of children ever got to see. May he live in syndication forever.

One night I built a small fire in the backyard for Cass, a tiny campfire in a old cinder block, with just a few sticks, and we roasted some marshmallows. Did you know that there is something about a fire that triggers the right side of the brain in children? Something from our past. Stories are better when told around a fire, and so is the conversation. We poked at the embers, and we imagined that this was all we had to stay warm, and all we had to cook our food. We even talked about fire itself, and wondered if we had any idea what made it work.

Just before we went in, Cass looked at me and said, "Dad, this is greatest night of my life." It was such a spontaneous and unexpected comment that it took me completely by surprise. And it made me think about parenting. All our kids really want from us is more of our time. We work so hard to provide for them, and forget sometimes that what they want is for us to "hang" with them, until they become teenagers, of course, when they want us to disappear. But now that I have adult children who are married, it's funny how they come back, looking for you again.

And if they saw in you an empathic imagination at work, they will develop one too. All my children are tender-hearted almost to a fault. That is Shawn's influence, especially with regard to animals whom she imbued with divinity and personality and asked her children to imagine being. In her way, she was asking them to escape the prison of the human self and to imagine what it's like to be a dog, or a red-tail fox, or even a bear in Colorado.

Most of the great teachers we remember from school were the ones who gave us permission to imagine. But I remember a moment from my early childhood in which a teacher who lacked imagination literally walked over my psyche and wiped her feet. I was in the second grade, in the town of Searcy, Arkansas. I was in love with a girl named Rosemary. At least I thought I was. She said she just wanted to be friends. That was fine with me, as long we could make progress.

I imagined that she would eventually fall in love with me, we would date for about 15 years and then get married and have lots of kids. She had long blonde hair that flew out away from her head on the merry-go-round and seemed to defy gravity. In fact, everything about her seemed to defy the natural order. In my mind, she didn't walk, she floated. She didn't speak, she sang. She was a vision that inspired visions. But how could I let her know how I felt?

I thought about it during class when I should have been paying attention. Finally I chose a simple written questionnaire. It was straightforward and left little room for ambiguity. In block letters it said, simply, DO YOU LOVE ME? And then, underneath, two boxes, one labeled YES, the other No. Instructions: Check One. It was a kind of love ballot, forcing her to decide. I was not interested in providing other choices: As a Friend. Maybe. None of the above but let's talk about it on the playground. I wanted this thing settled. Like those pollsters who call and say, "If the election were held today. . ."

I had everything figured out except how to pass the note without getting caught. The teacher intercepted it, walked to the front of the class with the note in her hand, and said to the class: *Robin, shall I read this to the class?*

I remember thinking that time itself stood still. I felt the blood rise in my throat and make me dizzy. My tops of my ears felt hot. Everyone in the class was staring at me, which when you're a kid feels like an actual force exerting itself. I said, "No, please don't."

But she did. She unfolded it, and very slowly and very deliberately read it to the class. And they laughed. Everyone laughed, and the sound of it was worse than any sound I have ever heard.

I couldn't bring myself to look at Rosemary, but I remember thinking that even the box marked NO would be preferable to this. Why would any teacher do such a thing? I cannot imagine.

Neither could she. She had all the credentials, I suppose. But she lacked imagination. There is never a reason, any reason, to shame a child, or to embarrass any child, and then to think that this wound will heal over into some kind of moral lesson. When the powerful have the powerless at their mercy, they need to show mercy – or get into some other line of work.

Multiply that incident a million times, and you begin to see how lack of imagination is in fact the precursor to most of the evil in the world. Hearts that never leave home. Souls that never venture out, or climb Jacob's ladder.

Joseph Conrad once wrote: "Only in men's imagination does every truth find an effective and undeniable existence. Imagination," he said, "not invention, is the supreme master of art as of life." Oliver Wendell Holmes reminded us that "A human mind, once stretched to a new idea, never returns to its former dimensions."

But my favorite story is the one that Matthew Fox tells. It's the story of a Catholic sister in Chicago who worked with women in prison. She came to visit her clients one day and told them that she had acquired a sum of money, and that she wanted to have their input as to how the money should be spent. She said that they had three choices.

One, they could request that the sister use the money to get a very good lawyer to review their cases, and possibly get them out sooner. Two, she could use the money to hire a welder who would teach the women how to weld so that they would have an employable skill when they left, and a better chance of getting a job. Or three, she could get a dance instructor and a painter to come in and teach the women how to dance and how to paint.

Ninety percent of the female prisoners chose the dance instruction and the painting supplies. Why? Because they said it would be the first time in their lives that they would have the opportunity to *express* themselves.

I have spent most of my life trying to survive, one of the women said, but I've never really had the opportunity to imagine or to create.

Frederick Buechner said this: *Imagining is perhaps as close as humans get to creating something out of nothing the way God is said to. It is a power that to one degree or another*

everybody has or can develop, like whistling. Like muscles, it can be strengthened through practice and exercise. Keep at it until you can actually hear your grandfather's voice, for instance, or feel the rush of hot air when you open the four hundred and fifty degree oven.

. . .If you want to know what loving your neighbors is all about, look at them with more than just your eyes. The bag lady settling down for the night on the hot- air grating. The two children chirping like birds in the sandbox. The bride as she walks down the aisle on her father's arm. The old man staring into space in the nursing home TV room. Try to know them for who they are inside their skins. Hear not just the words they speak but the words they do not speak . . .

Years ago, the great Lutheran pastor Joseph Sittler told a group of us in a sermon at Phillips that oil was going to be our undoing. He was way ahead of his time. We can't just keep poking these straws into the earth, he said, and sucking out a finite resource. It shows that we know nothing about stewardship. He should see us now, at war for oil, and watching the Gulf of Mexico turn into a tar pit. The shrimp boats idle, the dead birds washing up, and the endless parade of lies. We are rolling the dice on mother earth, and we are losing.

Can we imagine something different? Windmills turning? Electric cars moving silently through clear air? The rays of the sun converted into electricity? Water moving turbines, geothermal heating homes, even refuse turned into power?

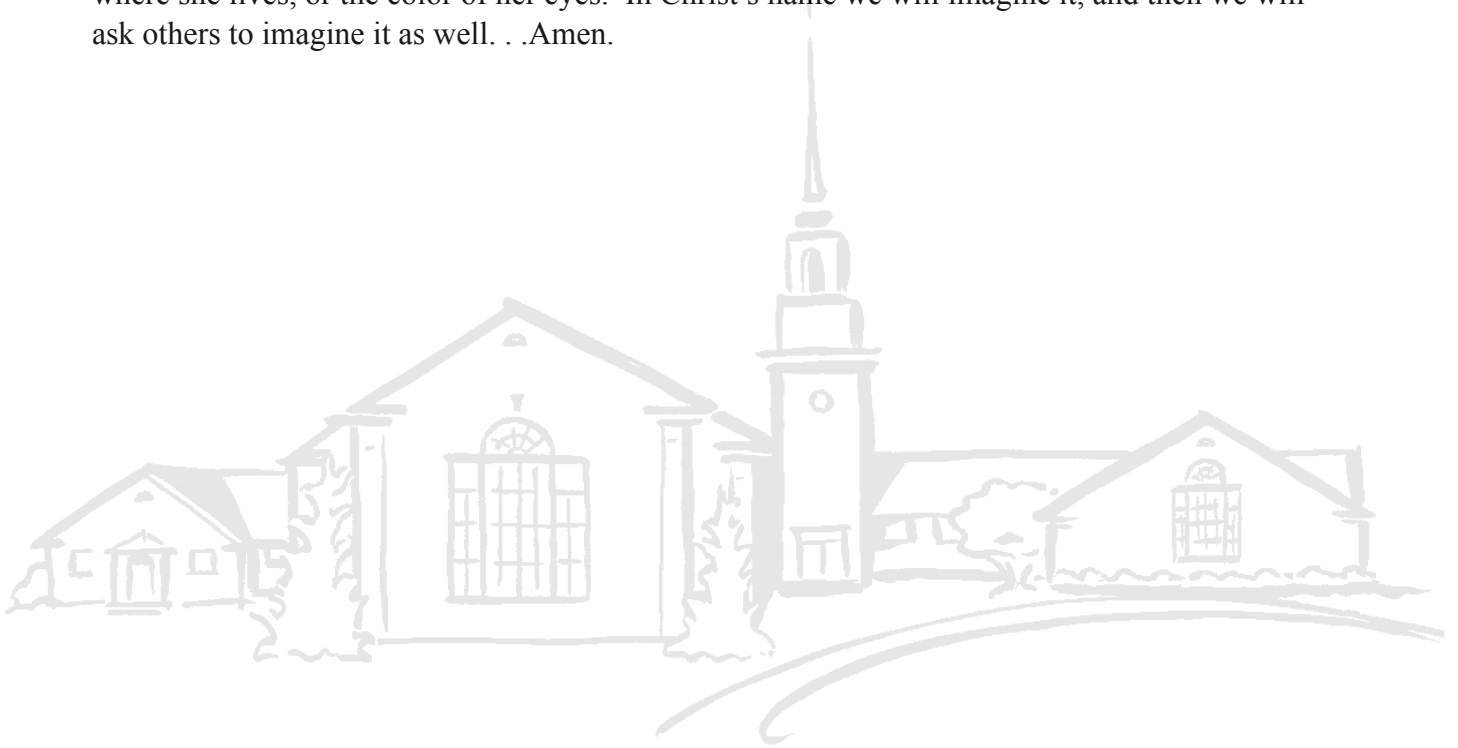
Only if we can imagine. Imagine. The title of John's Lennon's most haunting melody. Imagine what it would be like if someone sang it right now . . .

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Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, May 30, 2010

Dear Lord, who imagined the world into being, imagine it on a long arch that bends toward justice – open our hearts by giving us the gift of an empathic imagination. This is not kid's stuff. This is the essential transportation of the soul. Help us to know how to travel this way, without

leaving home, and especially when it comes to understanding the plight of our neighbor. We can't do that until we imagine what it's like, what it's *really* like, to be the neighbor – the same one for whom we are the neighbor, if we could both just imagine it. And if possible, Lord, remind us that the enemy is also our neighbor, and that a child is a child is a child, no matter where she lives, or the color of her eyes. In Christ's name we will imagine it, and then we will ask others to imagine it as well. . . Amen.



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