



SACRAMENTAL RITES, Part 1 of 2
January 20, 2019, Everybody Hour
Epiphany Parish of Seattle

In God, we live and move and have our being. (Acts 17:28)

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.” (Luke 22:20)

Poetry as Sacrament: Disentangling from the Darkness, By Parker J. Palmer

<https://onbeing.org/blog/poetry-as-sacrament-disentangling-from-the-darkness/>

Years ago, a teacher told me, “*Poetry is my religion.*” I didn’t understand what she meant until I began reading Mary Oliver, whose poems often strike me as sacraments — outward and visible signs of an inward and invisible grace.

Some mornings when I wake up — this morning was one of them — I find it hard to disentangle myself from the darkness. My analytic mind can usually tell me why. Today it was a lingering illness, a vexing email I got last night, and events that weigh me down, especially the murderous, white racist attack on worshipers at a black church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Understanding the “why” helps me gain perspective. But that kind of knowledge does not free me from the night, free me to move into the day to engage the world with trust and hope. So this morning, as I always do, I turned to poetry — another kind of knowing — in search of grace, and found a dimly-remembered Mary Oliver poem called “Landscape”:

Isn't it plain the sheets of moss, except that
they have no tongues, could lecture
all day if they wanted about

spiritual patience? Isn't it clear
the black oaks along the path are standing
as though they were the most fragile of flowers?

Every morning I walk like this around
the pond, thinking: if the doors of my heart
ever close, I am as good as dead.

Every morning, so far, I'm alive. And now
the crows break off from the rest of the darkness
and burst up into the sky—as though

all night they had thought of what they would like
their lives to be, and imagined
their strong, thick wings.

Grace comes from surprising places. This time it came from those crows. They reminded me that, though I was entangled in the darkness, I am not one with it — any more than the crows' strong black wings are one with the night from which they fly. They reminded me that I, too, have wings to lift me out of the darkness toward the light I would like my life to be, wings of faith and will, imagination and skill.

No, I'm not "Birdman" of recent cinema fame. My darkness is not *that* neurotic, and it doesn't help to get into a (forgive me) flap about life. But I swear that Mary Oliver's portrayal of those crows unslumped my shoulders as if wings were beginning to grow back there.

Then there are those sturdy black oaks that the poet sees as "the most fragile of flowers," and the sheets of moss she hears lecturing us about "spiritual patience." In those oaks, I see myself, looking strong while feeling fragile. They remind me to let myself be vulnerable, to become whole by acknowledging weakness as well as strength. In that moss, I'm reminded of the patience I need to ride out the weather that's forever passing through. My morning darkness is but one more movement in the ever-changing pattern from which no living thing is exempt.

Taking in those images readied me for this truth: "...if the doors of my heart/ever close, I am as good as dead." As long as I can feel the darkness as well as the light, those doors remain open — and with the poet, I can say, "Every morning, so far, I'm alive." I chalk that blessed fact up to a combination of dumb luck, the love of friends, the kindness of strangers, and the grace mediated by life's many sacraments, including poetry and the natural world. For this I can only say, "Thank you."

"Poetry," said C.S. Lewis, "is a little incarnation." When I read Mary Oliver, those little incarnations add up. They help me step full-bodied into the day with whatever light I possess to do whatever I can to illumine the darkness.