
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Spirituality

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

I am delighted that you found Mary Oliver. I have seen a lot of life through her eyes. If it were up to me, her poem “The Summer Day” would be read in every confirmation service, and “Wild Geese” at every wedding!

I understand how the image of the poet walking through the woods with pencil and notebook in her hand would make you wonder what religion has to do with spirituality.

A closer look at the poet’s life, though, reveals the answer.

Mary Oliver once characterized herself as being obedient to an ultimate mystery. “We alone are not sufficient,” she said. “There is something that has to do with us that is more than all of us are.”

She talked about her life as an intentional effort to become more attentive to this mystery (she named it “convivial listening”), and described her attention as the beginning of devotion.

She called her poems gifts.

Her words resonate with Anglican spirituality. They are earthy, sacramental, and prayerful; responsive to mystery; and inclined to gratitude – although our tradition is more collaborative than Mary Oliver’s solitary life would seem to have allowed. And, I should say that, despite her involvement with the church, she never joined; she had trouble with the resurrection.

Spirituality, though, depends on religion to take these experiences of mystery, and make them part of our lives. We rely on doctrines, rituals, practices, and community to develop an awareness that makes sense of everything. And, we look to them for motivation when responding to the challenges that they reveal.

There is a dark side, of course. Those committed to clearing the one true way repeatedly turn the plowshares of our tradition into swords at the first sign of trouble. Witnessing this drives many people to claim that they are “spiritual, but not religious.”

For most of us, though, spirituality and religion go hand in hand. Each pulling the other along, the way biology births culture, and culture evolves biology.

Did you know that Mary Oliver wrote “Wild Geese” as an exercise in end-stopped lines? It’s a literary device; end-stopped lines end with punctuation or other break. She said she heard the sounds of the geese flying overhead while demonstrating this technique to another poet.

And, do you remember the grasshopper in “The Summer Day” – “the one who has flung herself out of the grass”? Did you know that there really was a grasshopper!

If spirituality is about awareness, then religion is about getting a life.

You’ll need both to answer the poet’s question, “what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

“The world offers itself to your imagination.”

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

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