

## THE JOURNEY

One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began,  
though the voices around you  
kept shouting  
their bad advice-  
though the whole house  
began to tremble  
and you felt the old tug  
at your ankles.  
“Mend my life!”  
each voice cried.  
But you didn’t stop.  
You knew what you had to do,  
though the wind pried  
with its stiff fingers  
at the very foundations-  
though their melancholy  
was terrible.  
It was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen  
branches and stones.  
But little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice,  
which you slowly recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do-  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.

Mary Oliver

## The Journey-Commentary

MARY OLIVER maps out the only trip worth taking ... and ROGER HOUSDEN explores how Mary Oliver's poem eerily mirrored his own life-changing trip.  
(Please see the attached poem).

"THE JOURNEY" IS A POEM OF transformation, and as much as any poem Oliver ever wrote, it is a mirror in which you can see a reflection of your own story. It captures that moment when you dare to take your heart in your hands and walk through an invisible wall into a new life.

When I first read this poem I had just landed in San Francisco from London. That one reading made my hair stand on end. It confirmed the rightness of all that had just happened in my life. A few months earlier, I had woken up one morning and knew I should leave my native country of England and go and live in America. Just like that. Rather than a decision, it was like recognizing something whose time had come. Everything needed to change, and the time was now. I sold my house, my library; my love of 12 years and I finally parted; I read my diaries of 25 years, and then burned them. I got on a plane to California, and I have been there, in a new life, ever since.

The move to America was a long time coming. On the other hand, it took no time whatsoever. I was 53 at the time. This kind of knowing just happens. One day, I was lying in my bed in my hometown of Bath, England, when something that had been gestating for years suddenly stepped out into the clear light of day. When it finally came out of my mouth, I realized that what had surfaced was the true journey of my life - its underground stream, its guiding motif.

Perhaps this sounds too dramatic, too grand a gesture, for the kind of lives that most of us live. Yet at the time, it was the only thing to do. The poem might seem dramatic to you, too; surely, you might think, it must have been written for the benefit of someone else -- not for you, not for your humdrum, ordinary life. After all, you may say, you are hardly about to leave everything behind and strike out into some mysterious territory.

Don't be so sure. I believe that Mary Oliver's poem can speak to anyone, wherever they are on their journey. Profound and significant changes can occur through the smallest, apparently insignificant gesture. If you are in the right place and read this poem at the right time, it may be the nudge you need to fall headlong into the life that has been waiting for you all along.

*One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began ...*

EVERYTHING HANGS ON THAT first step. It is not enough to *know*, you have to begin. The time for discussion and deliberation is over. In a lucid moment like this, the mind is quiet with a tender certainty. It is time to start walking, to stand by the truth you may have known all along but were not ready until this moment to call by its true name.

IT HAD TAKEN ME A LONG TIME to be ready. In my case, the shell of my life had to be softened, broken down even, before that moment of truth could appear. I needed to be humbled, cooked in the tears of loss, for any deeper life to emerge.

The pain of loss, grief, and despair is not essential for transformation. It is possible to step into a new life in

more graceful ways. But for most of us, and certainly for me, pain and loss usually prepare the way. The moment itself may seem effortless, but a lifetime of suffering may have preceded it. A new life requires a death of some kind; otherwise it is nothing new, but rather a shuffling of the same deck. What we die to is an outworn way of being in the world. We experience ourselves differently. We are no longer who we thought we were. But I do not suggest for one moment that it is easy. Nor that there are any guarantees. If you start down a new road, you cannot know where it will take you.

All the same, when you are ready, you begin. The directness of this knowing, quiet yet strong, can propel you out of your habitual perceptions of life and into the unknown before you have even a moment to think twice about it,

The forces wanting you to stay where you are can be daunting. But the choice is always yours.

*though the voices around you kept shouting  
their bad advice-  
though the whole house began to tremble  
and you felt the old tug at your ankles.  
"Mend my life!"  
each voice cried.  
But you didn't stop.*

A JOURNEY LIKE THIS GOES against the prevailing current. It requires you to step out of line, to break with polite society. Other people will feel the ripples, and they won't like it. Any authentic movement usually requires a break with the past -- not because the past *is* bad, but because it is so difficult for a deeper truth to make itself known among the accretions of habit and conformity.

It may mean that one day, for no apparent reason, you simply know that you cannot continue to play by the rules you have accepted for years -- the unwritten rules of a relationship, the abuses of power at work, the script you have written for your own life. It may signify a spiritual awakening, prompt you to enter a monastery, travel the world, announce your love for someone, or start painting -- only you will know how the poem reflects the unique design of your own journey.

Whatever your circumstance, people will start to give you advice as soon as you disturb the status quo. That advice is likely to be bad. It will be bad because they are seeking not to understand and further your calling but to preserve the world as they know it. And yet in the midst of the shouting and the falling masonry you will know with an unusual quietness that it is all happening in the only way it can, and that whichever way it turns out, no matter what suffering you endure, it will be all right. There, in the midst of the cyclone, is the peace that passes understanding.

*though their melancholy  
was terrible.*

HOW MANY OF US KEEP ON walking, how many of us stay true to what we know our lives are crying out for, when those close to us implore us to stay behind and look to their needs? So much of your life can be spent in anxiety and worry over others, especially if you are a woman. Women are both genetically and culturally disposed to caring for others, even when it means disregarding their own needs. Yet to walk on, as the person in the poem does, is to finally realize that you cannot shoulder another person's work for them. This life is a vale of soul-making, Keats said; and each one of us must take the charge of our lives upon ourselves. Far from being a display of selfishness, this is the most compassionate act you can do for anyone: to stand by the truth of your own life and live it as fully and passionately as you are able.

In leaving your past behind you, you walk through your fear of the unknown. To walk on despite all the pleas for you to come back is to know that you are free from the clutches of guilt. When you are free of the grip of guilt and fear, love blooms: love of the truth. You will say what you have to say, and do what you have to do - not out of anger, nor irresponsibility, but because if you do not cleave to the truth, you

know you will die. After all,

*it was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen  
branches and stones.*

ALREADY LATE ENOUGH: HOW long will you go on sleeping? This calling is passionate, urgent, even. Once you hear it, you cannot help but feel how late it is. You may have waited all your life for this one moment; there are no second thoughts. You wake to a wild night. Why does Mary Oliver insist it be wild? Perhaps because truth is wild; it is dangerous. It upsets things, brings down branches that were rotten on the tree, dislodges stones whose foundations were already shaky. The wild is uncompromising; its terms are always nonnegotiable, and it would rather die than not be true to what it knows.

No wonder, then, that a journey of this kind can seem fraught with danger, at least from the perspective of common sense. Danger and darkness are in the nature of any pilgrimage, whatever the destination. Perhaps this is why, in old Arabic poetry, travel is considered one of the four great subjects worthy of the poet (along with love, song, and blood). These were considered the basic desires of the human heart, and thus travel was elevated to the dignity of being a necessity for any human being who is truly alive.

So when the wilderness courses through your veins you have no option but to leave conventional wisdom behind and head for the source - for the source of some holy river, the summit of a mountain, perhaps, but always to the source that is in the innermost heart. The door for this journey opens inward as well as outward, and the inner terrain is often more rugged than any outer wilderness. Inward or outward, the journey will have its own wild beasts for you to contend with. And yet from the very beginning, you will be sustained by your knowing, by the rightness of it all. You will feel it in your bones. You will feel it in your blood before it ever forms into words.

*But little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice which you slowly  
recognized as your own ...*

HOWEVER YOU UNDERSTAND IT within the context of your own life, Mary Oliver's "The Journey" speaks to the birth of a new self. This is the self who slips through the cracks of the ordinary mind when the sentry is off guard. If there is one word that can describe its voice, it is the word *authentic*. It will carry your own true taste, free of the flavor of anyone else. It is true, even if small, unashamedly small. You might even say this new identity is self-born, an immaculate conception of the spirit in you that is on an altogether different frequency and level to the life you have lived so far.

This new self does not walk away from the world, but into it. Its voice, Mary Oliver tells us,

*... kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world ...*

IT WANTS TO PLUNGE INTO LIFE with a dedication and a commitment that can only come with a rare abandon. Not a commitment to save the world; not necessarily the determination to fight for some cause, but the readiness to stand by your deepest knowing and to express that in your life first, whatever that may mean. In daring to do that, you do not leave the human community behind; on the contrary, you affirm your belonging within it, and your identification with the struggles and joys of all. In being true to that small voice within, the poet says, you are being of service to others and to the world in the most profound way possible. You cannot know where that voice will take you, but in being willing "to save the only life you could save," you are affirming one of the deepest and most sobering truths of all: