Remembering Mary Oliver
By Tim Beatley

Discovering Mary Oliver opened up a remarkable new dimension in my life, as it did for many others. Oliver passed away on January 17, 2019, leaving an immense literary void for many of us who relied on her inspired stanzas for a measure of insight and hope.

Poetry is, Oliver says in her A Poetry Handbook, “a life-cherishing force....” ‘Poems are not words, after all, but fires for the cold, ropes let down to the lost, something as necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry.’ It all really started for me as an experiment in summer writing. Poetry, and my attempts to try on what it might be like to be a poet, unfolded during the summer of 2011. It turned out to be the next natural extension in a personal quest to explore all things natural (though this exploration was anything but systematic). My wife Anneke encouraged and enabled these flights of ecological fancy; there was the summer I wanted to be a mycologist, and another summer it was a fascination with bats, and yet another summer an obsession with dragonflies. At each point my wife humored me, purchasing a variety of books and guidebooks (delivered as birthday presents) to help along these amateur aspirations.

Poetry emerged for me similarly. My first task in becoming a poet, I thought (and Oliver recommends this in her Handbook), was to read as much poetry as I possibly could. I had a sense that with poetry just about anything goes, but I wanted to see and read firsthand all the poetic approaches and voices possible. Again, my birthday presents that year stoked that interest. In one popular anthology of poetry I encountered for the first time a Mary Oliver poem, and it has turned out to be my favorite. The Black Walnut Tree (presented to left).

I soon discovered what Oliver knew so well—that poems had real power, both in their writing and in their reading by others. For me writing a poem was part puzzle, part zen meditation. It was a chance to work through the significance of something small that I had discovered (a Blue Jay feather), or heard or experienced (a storm, a snow event), or just thought about (death and aging), and to create a nugget of expression, a compact package of words that helped me to make sense of things. I have enjoyed, as well, organizing the spatial flow of words on a page; poems are a kind of sculptured word art. For me, the poems are reward enough without anyone else reading them (though I am hoping my kids may discover and relish them at some later point in time).

Oliver showed that poetry need not be inaccessible or obtuse; indeed it should not be. It does not take an English professor to finely interpret what her poems say or mean—that is not necessary. You know what they mean, and their impact is felt, almost like a warm breeze or a bird call or the textures of the bark of an oak tree. They are crisp and clear and understandable; powerful in their meaning and intent and purpose. Her poems are paeans to nature; they profess a sense of reverence for and curiosity about the outside world, and a sense of mystery as well, that lasted the entirety of her life. Her poems are deeply personal as she in a way introduces readers to a natural world that consists of many close friends and kin, whether red bird or cricket or lily.

Oliver approached the writing of poetry not so much as strokes of inspiration but as a craft to be worked. Poems had to be sufficiently labored over to be good. She talks of the typical “forty or fifty drafts” and the “almost endless task” of revision. Hard work is the norm but the potential positive results are infinite. “It is good to remember,” she says, “how many sweet and fine poems there are in the world—I mean, it is a help to remember that out of writing, and the rewriting, beauty is born.”

I have enjoyed writing some of my own poetry, but more enjoyable still has been sharing poetry with others. In my large introductory lecture class, I started to read a poem as a way of closing each class. It was not always easy to halt the outward rush of students anxious to move on to their next commitments, to hush them into listening. Probably at least half the time it was a Mary Oliver poem. In addition to reading poems in class, I made copies of poems and gave them out as students handed in their midterm and final exams. It was a kind of gift, something I could give them of great value and I know they were mostly appreciated. In another class, Cities + Nature, I asked students to keep an urban nature journal. Certain things must be in those journals, including at least one original poem. I have plans to collect and publish these poems because so many of them are so lovely. Writing a poem, Oliver taught me, is a way of communicating emotion and affection for wild places; something essential for urban planning students to learn in a world where the forces of destruction seem to have such a head start.

Once I had the idea that I was going to write an article about the power of poetry; about how poetry could save the world. I had to talk to Mary Oliver, I thought, and so I reached out to her publishing company. They referred me to her publicist who referred me to her agent (the precise sequence is today a bit fuzzy). The word eventually came back that Oliver did not do interviews. I was crestfallen but not surprised. I’ve wondered ever since what that conversation might have been like. I am sure she would have been modest about her own role. And I suspect she might have advised me to spend less time pontificating about the need for more poetry and more time reading and writing it. And I am sure she would have advised me to get off the phone and go outside.