

The Untethered Soul,
Jan 27, 19
Rev. Linda Simmons

We have been watching movies once a month from the Nantucket Project called the Neighborhood Project. The one we most recently watched was called *Seen and Unseen* and Kelly Corrigan, author and journalist and now on the Nantucket Project staff team, began by asking us all to imagine that we might experience if we were blind and in a room full of people who also could not see. She wondered how we would know and be known without sight that allows judgments based on clothing, color, physical ability and beauty. Would those used to getting attention, in part because of how they look, feel invisible?

Would those whose appearances are so often used against them, be suddenly set free, visible for who they know themselves to be?

The movie reviewed the life of Gordon Gund, a wealthy business man who owned sports teams and investment corporations. He went blind at the age of 35. At first, he was lost, covered over in darkness and despair. But, with the help of his wife Llura, he found beauty and eventually light in his blindness and in time, learned to sculpt. Gund sculpted images of whales' tails and birds that make stone look more like something fluid than fixed, more motion than solid.

Gund owns a home on Nantucket and for a piece of sculpture he calls *flukes* depicting the tail of a whale, he writes that he tried to capture, "the power of the musculature, and the torque of the speed which can emerge from these multi-ton animals as they swim, dive and surface in the waters off Nantucket."

A cognitive psychologist who was part of narrating the show, Donald Hoffman, said, "We think perceptions are a window on truth. Perceptions were developed to hide the truth. We do not see reality as it is nor are we supposed to." I imagine he was talking about quarks and molecules and the lack of solidity in the world that we see as so solid.

Or even what we cannot see what lives on our skin or in the air. There is only so much we can take in without losing our sense of ground. But what does this ground that our perception insists on cost us in terms of sensing and living more fully?

Gund said something very interesting during the film, "Blindness enabled me to see the world." "Blindness enabled me to see the world."

What world could Gund now see without his eyes? Could he see compassion and empathy and interconnection? Could he see beauty's core, its dependence on everything around it? Could he see the spirit that animates life?

A master of perception and giving voice to the spirit, poet Mary Oliver, died last week of lymphoma. Krista Tippett played an interview of her from 2015 on her show, On Being. When I heard Oliver's voice, its raspiness surprised me. We learned that she smoked most of her life and still smoked. We learned during the interview that she was sexually abused as a child and about the deep poverty she lived in as a poet in the early years. She tells us that she spent so much time in the woods and along the shores of Provincetown, the land of her poetry where she lived for many years, because she was foraging for food.

How my perception shifted during this interview. How I came to see the light Oliver found and gave voice to as not only a form of a presence that heals but of surviving, of going on.

How my eyes have tricked me into seeing Mary Oliver as born under the leaves of an old oak that captivated her for life, as one who could never fill herself with smoke or non-organic food. Alas, she is human, multiple, full of paradox and contradiction like all of us and from her humanity comes her beauty, her poetry, her ability to perceive the eternal in the sound of the gull's voice.

Tippett says to Oliver during the interview: "[Y]ou write about the discipline that creates space for something quite mysterious to happen.

You talk about that "wild, silky part of ourselves." You talk about the "(how the psyche exists) in a mysterious, unmapped zone: not unconscious, not subconscious, but *cautious*."¹

The wild, silky part of ourselves. Does your wild, silky part rise up when you hear those words? I love this way of describing and seeing the soul. And Oliver's use of the word cautious: how the psyche or soul exists in a mysterious, unmapped zone: not unconscious, not subconscious, but *cautious*.

Cautious Oliver says, present as we are when we are awake, aware and able to stay with it all, all of this, all of our own humanity. This soul Oliver describes, this untethered yet grounded soul, perceives unhinged from expectation, lives with the reverence of caution and the abandon of fully participating. Like learning to walk when blind. Like becoming a sculptor who cannot see and yet learns for the first time to see.

I imagine Gurdjieff had to become one with not only with his blindness but with uncertainty. He had to surrender and take hold too. He had to learn cautious devotion, the kind that sets you into the world and keeps you awake.

How do we maintain caution devotion? Indeed, where is it to be found?

I think of Pema Chodron's work when she tells us that we have to let go of resolution in order to be present, or as Oliver says, in order to experience this cautious devotion. She says that we believe we deserve resolution but that this is not true. We do not deserve resolution because it is a source of suffering, Pema Chodron tells us.

¹ <https://onbeing.org/programs/mary-oliver-listening-to-the-world-jan2019/>

What is the suffering that resolution causes? I think of myself at five corners in the summer and how I wait and wait and think, "When I get through this, I'll relax." But I get through it and immediately need another resolution, like, "When I finish this sermon, I'll feel more at ease or When my mother moves into a senior housing facility, I'll know she is safe."

Turning our minds and hearts constantly toward the next thing that we are sure will be the solution to what ails us, is a distraction from the frailty and loss and heart breaking tenderness of living whole heartedly with ourselves and one another, of cautiously devoting ourselves to the awareness of this moment.

As Mary Oliver writes,

"I know, you never intended to be in this world. / But you're in it all the same. // So why not get started immediately. // I mean, belonging to it. / There is so much to admire, to weep over. // And to write music or poems about. // Bless the feet that take you to and fro. / Bless the eyes and the listening ears. / Bless the tongue, the marvel of taste. / Bless touching. / You could live a hundred years, it's happened. / Or not. / I am speaking from the fortunate platform / of many years, / none of which, I think, I ever wasted. / Do you need a prod? / Do you need a little darkness to get you going? / Let me be as urgent as a knife, then, / and remind you of Keats, / so single of purpose and thinking, for a while, / he had a lifetime."

Do you need a little darkness to prod you on, what we turn our sight from so often? Keats, so single of purpose and thinking, so cautiously devoted, that he had a lifetime. Do you know that feeling? Do you know that experience of a present so full that it feels like there is no end to anything at all?

I have experienced that as a young mother, rocking my daughter in the crook of my leg, while she slept in innocence and love, knowing only the moment or when walking for miles along the shore or when suddenly filled with a radical acceptance of my past and present that frees me from longing.

I say this even knowing that not all moments are beautiful and not equally beautiful for all of us. Race, gender orientation, gender itself, ability and demographics all play a part in if the present feels like an eternity that is life giving or life sapping. And still, being present even in the suffering allows a healing and freedom and way forward. This does not have to mean that we all sit still as the world calls out to us.

It means that if we are to live strong enough to be of use to ourselves and others, we need some time to be still enough to know what it is to be here now. From this place, from this broken, sacred place, we can learn to see what our eyes cannot show us, we can learn what is needed to go into the world with a cautious devotion that can show us what we must see in order to go on well.

Mary Oliver adores the work of Lucretius, a Roman poet and philosopher born in 99 BC.

Oliver says, “Lucretius presents this marvelous and important idea that what we are made of will make something else.

There is no nothingness — with these little atoms that run around too little for us to see. But, put together, they make something. And that to me is a miracle. Where it came from, I don’t know. But it’s a miracle, and I think it’s enough to keep a person afloat.”

Enough to keep us afloat, this attentive, cautious, presence that is aware so much exists beyond sight, and that sees more clearly with eyes shut and heart open, that knows there is no beginning or end, only the connectivity of being here together.

At the end of the movie, seen and unseen, Gordon Gund says, “It is funny how we use the word see. I find myself saying *It’s good to see you. What I mean is to be in your presence.*”

What a miracle this is, this presence that we can offer one another that brings sight, that brings what we know and cannot know into focus in a way that allows us to risk living with ourselves and one another in new ways.

The discipline that creates space for something quite mysterious to happen that Mary Oliver writes about requires attention, the kind of attention that blindness allows. But with our eyes wide open we can learn how to see into a world that awakens and challenges us to be here, right now. Right now.

The blessing of coming together like this on Sundays and in all the other ways we come together, is not simply about a sermon or the wonderful music we hear or hanging together with our peeps. It is not this thing or that thing. We come because we are transformed when we gather in this way, awake to a sense that between us there is a mystery, a mystery born out of presence, accountability, forgiveness and acceptance. A mystery that we do not have to name or write books of truth about. A mystery that moves us toward sight.

Close your eyes from time to time and see what becomes more visible when the wild, silky thing in you becomes cautiously untethered. This journey of transformation is the road we chart together. It is good to be companions on the way.

Amen.