Opinion
Spirituality



(Dreamstime/Eduard Goricev)



by Christian Mocek

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

July 18, 2019

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

It's not that we meant it to be this way but as we've progressed in our marriage, we've settled into roles more stereotypical than atypical. In short, most of the time, my wife, Gillian, cooks and I clean the dishes.

This night, I stumbled into the kitchen after falling asleep next to my son's bed. The dishes were in the sink, still dirty from dinner, and Gillian was prepping lunch for the next day. I briefly thought about tackling the dishes the next morning but I knew my other half wouldn't appreciate that so I didn't push it. I filled up the sink with water and started washing.

Through the Bluetooth speaker came the voice of Krista Tippett, the host of NPR's "On Being," introducing her guest — the poet Mary Oliver. Tippett was revisiting a conversation I had never heard, so my ears perked up as I scrubbed.

Gillian and I didn't talk much that night. We weren't mad at each other; we were simply tired. Tired from raising a 3-year-old. Tired from maintaining a house in all its 70-year-old aches and pains.

Most of all, we were tired from death. The week before, two of our mentors and friends had died suddenly and unexpectedly. They didn't know each other, each passing in their own quick way.

Each much closer to other people in their lives than us, but nevertheless they were individuals we talked to nearly every day in one way or another. That night, we were standing on the other side of a week that began with their deaths and ended with their visitations and funerals.

Advertisement

That night, our quiet was grounding us to the floor we stood on and the tasks we were undertaking while our hearts and minds wandered in search of a soft place to land.

Then, breaking through my wandering mind, was Mary Oliver's voice:

> The question is,

what will it be like

after the last day?

Will I float

into the sky

or will I fray

within the earth or a river —

remembering nothing?

She was reading "The Fourth Sign of the Zodiac," from her collection *Blue Horses*. A poem about her battle with lung cancer and making the best of what's left. You can read the full poem here.

Gillian and I stopped working as she read. We moved toward each other as she continued.

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.

I'm aware I'll never be able to treasure life enough. I'm too human for that. But death opens the door of the heart in unexpected ways. Sometimes it forces you to become aware of your own body — the gift that it is — and consider all that's left of you to still give, no matter how weary your soul.

Thankfully, to offer strength when we need it most, God visits us in all sorts of places. That night, the Spirit arrived in all her tenderness in the place I least expected her — at the kitchen sink after a long day, in the quiet of my home, stilling the restlessness and healing the brokenness of my heart.

Her teaching me to be thankful for all that I have left. Her telling me there is still much work to be done.

For you, maybe she will visit you there, too. Or somewhere else you least expect. Taking a lesson from Mary Oliver, it seems the only thing we have to do is to treasure the world and work that is in front of us. That's what God gave us and that's where we need to begin.

[Christian Mocek is the director of annual giving at St. Meinrad, a Benedictine monastery, seminary and school of theology. He lives in New Albany, Indiana, with his wife and one son.]

Editor's note: *We can send you a newsletter every time a Young Voices column is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: Newsletter sign-up.*