

Quincy

Ordinary life intrudes on those moments of inspiration.

When I think sometimes about the fact that I spend so much time in solitude or in my head, or both, and start to admonish myself as too solitary, some instinctive voice screams caution. The world outside and the world within are always competing for your attention, drawing you away from that quiet room of rumination.

Oliver's words help me understand better why I guard my time, why I savor it because I love the mystery of chasing butterflies and catching thoughts to land them on the page. It's not selfishness as much as fear that without space, creativity might dry up.

Oliver writes about three selves in each of us: the child forever with us; the "servant of the hours," who remembers the mustard; and the third self that is "out of love with the ordinary," that chases something timeless, eternity even. Oliver sees the "purpose" of creativity as artists trying "not to help the world go around, but forward. Which is something altogether different from the ordinary. Such work does not refute the ordinary. It is, simply, something else. Its labor requires a different outlook, a different set of priorities."

As Oliver sees it, art is about the extraordinary—and it is about risk, and a lot of waiting:

"...the whole truth (is) that one must be ready at all hours, and always, that the ideas in their shimmering forms, in spite of all our conscious discipline, will come when they will, and on the swift upheaval of their wings—disorderly, reckless;...unmanageable..."

And what of this "place" of creativity? Oliver speculates that the Muse is less prone to like crowds, comforts or pleasures, more prone to like the outdoors, the concentrating mind, solitude: "Its concern is the edge, and the making of a form out of formlessness that is beyond the edge."

YES. I am drawn to the edges of things, edges between the known and unknown, between physics and poetry, the edges of in-between places like the one I lived for most of my young life as an identical twin. And what of form? The artist craves form for form is essential to make something from nothing. For the artist, form is the back side of noticing.

Oliver: "Form is certainty. All nature knows this; and we have no greater advisor. Clouds have form, porous and

shape-shifting...See a flock of them come on the sled of the wind, all kneeling above the blue sea...the albatross floating day after day on its three-jointed wings. Each form sets a tone, enables a destiny, strikes a note in the universe unlike any other. How can we ever stop looking?"

Indeed, form is what calls us to notice in the first place. It lies at the center of the business of noticing which is a kind of a job description for the artist or the seeker of eternity, or at the very least, a seeker of suspended time or heightened awareness.

Every other week, I travel to Newburyport to take a poetry workshop with the amazing poet and teacher Alfred Nicol. Each week, we meet in our group of eight, read each person's poems and then play with words in order to wrestle with meaning, hopefully to place it artfully on the page. It is only through hearing others read your work that you can see it sometimes for what it is in the world, what form it takes and how it communicates with the world outside your mind.

Poetry is an excellent way to wrestle with an image, a word, a phrase, an idea and then let the poem speak back to you. All of this happens in two hours of what I can only describe as suspended time, time in which we tilt at windmills and find meaning there. It is perhaps the reason someone goes to a painting class, or learns how to make a zen garden, or plays an instrument. It is to touch something outside our child self and our ordinary-time self, to touch something bigger and less tangible than memory or mind.

Meanwhile, how does the world see this artist, this chaser of butterflies?

Absentminded at best, totally distracted at worse? Oliver: "There is a notion that creative people are absentminded, reckless, heedless of social customs and obligations. It is, hopefully, true. For they are in another world altogether. It is a world where the third self is governor."

No shame or guilt—just the third self dwelling in that rumination place.

Picasso observed something similar: "The chief enemy of creativity is good sense."

The artist celebrates what is possible while keeping the door open for the impossible for which there is no logic or timetable, but rather a table waiting to be set. A Chinese proverb shares this wisdom: "The person who says something is impossible should not interrupt the person who is doing it."

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