

Coming to Mary Oliver for Spiritual Direction

How to be Empowered in the World The Search for Inner Authority

Mary Oliver (MO): Please come right on in. I don't get many people requesting spiritual direction and I am not sure what spiritual direction is, but I am touched by your telling me how much my poetry has helped you in your spiritual journey.

Seeker (S): Thank you so much for seeing me. For some reason, I feel you are someone I can be totally honest and open with. I believe you see reality more clearly than most.

MO: If you have read my poems then I guess we should start with my asking you: what are you doing *with your one, wild and precious life*?

S: That does get to the heart of it very quickly. I guess my struggle is around not feeling empowered in my own life.

MO: *You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.*

S: I love "Wild Geese" and that poem has helped me tremendously with shame but it still doesn't tell me how to feel empowered in my life.

MO: Let me quit quoting poetry and be a bit more discursive to see if I understand what you are asking. What does it mean to you to be empowered?

S: I grew up in a household, not nearly as abusive as I understand yours was, but it was always father knows best. The patriarchy was in full operational mode in my growing up. After college I went to work for a large

bank and a few years into that, I was getting very depressed. I went to a therapist who suggested that the male authority figures in the bank had become father images for me. I was working twelve hour a day seeking to get their approval, and in the process becoming burned out and resentful.

I believe I bought into the patriarchy in order for me to feel accepted and loved. Now I want to reject my subservient role, and I still want to feel loved. There are not many female role models I see out there besides you who speak truth from lived inner authority. You have not created a persona for yourself to make yourself into an authority figure. In other words, you have not become a feminized version of male ego authority.

MO: You are asking a developmental question. Our childhood ego needs approval in order to feel loved. Developmentally we gradually learn that our self worth and who we are is not dependent upon external approval from outside of ourselves. Slowly we learn to embrace our own unique essence or what is often called the true self from which inner authority comes.

Let me see if I can sketch out how this process gets off track. We all grow up initially under some power structure our parents create. It is essential and is intended to provide a safe, nurturing space for us to grow up in. The father's role is traditionally to bestow safety and security; it is necessary but in the process it creates a power-over structure that, like any power-over structure, can be abused. Sometimes the mother will be in this power-over role.

My childhood as you seem to know was a very abusive and dangerous place. I got out of it as soon as I could. Yours was probably much safer.

S: Yes, I never feared for my personal safety.

MO: Developmentally we move from hopefully a safe nurturing power-over structure to one in which we find our own inner authority. During our teenage years we try to find who we are through our peers and often later, like you did, through work. In this developmental process, everyone tries

initially to find a sense of who they are by getting approval outside themselves.

S: That is where I am. I have rejected seeking approval from a male corporate structure, but I don't know where to turn. I see many female empowerment models offered but they all seem to be about getting a big ego, whether it is females who are leaders in the corporate world or females who are gurus in the self-help world. I don't see many women who just seem to be themselves and speak their truth like you.

MO: You have a desire to have security and a sense of self identity and that is all wrapped up in how you relate to power. When young, we want and need safety. We want external authority because that is both where the threats seem to be and also where the approval is. Later on it is quite essential, as you are doing, to push against external sources of validation and come to a place of owning our own authority. I have to tell you frankly it's not a journey many women or men make, because it requires an inner refinement of how the world is perceived.

S: This is where I am stuck. By not knowing how to relate to external authority, I don't really know how to relate to myself and have my own sense of joyful identity.

MO: Your uncertainty and confusion is for good reason; it is complicated. When we rebel against our family power structure we initially try to compensate in one of two ways. We either try to recreate the family structure and seek power-over to feel okay; or we seek connection with others to feel okay.

S: I am not sure I understand.

MO: Women traditionally have been better at seeking connection rather than power-over; but today you see a lot of ego energy by women going into having power-over because they want to participate in a work world that largely thrives on power-over structures. Or, as a way to have some power, we see women obtaining power through connection in a subservient role in

a male power-over structure. Sometimes a woman will find power by interpreting the un-lived emotions of men, who have lost touch with their own inner emotional terrain. A man cannot be in touch with his true nature without emotional intelligence since it's our emotional intelligence that gives the necessary feedback to make good decisions in the world. Emotional intelligence makes empathy possible. Empathy arises from a mini-field experience which leads to what the Buddhist call right action. Patriarchal power particularly devastates women who get caught in a subservient role with men who have withered emotionally and compensate by making their power-over structure even more rigid. Male cruelty becomes a way to compensate for loss of the capacity to have genuine feelings.

A third way for both women and men is neither power-over, nor subservient power through connection, but a form of non-ego connection that gives rise to communion.

S: How have you experienced connection giving rise to communion.

MO: You know if you have read my poems. My poems are one long paean to my experience of connection and communion with nature.

S: Yes, I sure see that.

MO: But what may be touching your heart is the sorrow which comes with the hurt we often encounter as we grow emotionally.

*Someone I loved once gave me
a box full of darkness.
It took me years to understand
that this, too, was a gift.*

What I am trying to say in the lines of this poem is that many women like me never had the luxury of being able to go on a journey to find themselves. We were thrown into the world in an environment where we had to learn to

be empowered by something greater than ourselves to survive. In my case it was with nature and with writing about my experiences of the natural world which saved, consoled and enlivened me and manifested communion for me with the aliveness of the earth and its creatures and engendered my own aliveness. This sense of aliveness is another way to describe what feeling empowered means that is not power-over or subservient power.

S: Are you saying all ego efforts to feel empowered are doomed?

MO: The ego can be very helpful to create disciplines that can make one skillful in the world. For me it was the discipline of daily walking in nature and daily writing that helped me develop some skill as a poet. But skill itself does not make great poetry or a great life. What is needed is a source of connection with the real, unfolding dynamic of life itself and we have been given one great tool to do that.

S: What is that?

MO: Another few lines of poetry.

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.

S: You are saying that in order to be empowered and connected in the world all I need to do is pay attention.

MO: You are right it sounds too easy, too simple. It is not. However, our capacity for awareness is one of the most fundamental tools we humans have. The gifts awareness brings are caught in these lines.

When it's over, I want to say all my life

I was a bride married to amazement.

S: Reading your poetry often does often shift me into a feeling of amazement.

MO: How to live in this place of amazement depends upon how we perceive and our ability to control where our focus of attention habitually goes. After I left home, at first, it was easy for me to continually get caught in thoughts about how badly I had been treated by my father. Gradually I learned that all I had to do was to change my focus of attention from that inner turmoil, that I could do nothing about, to the natural world around me. Over time I found that the natural world around me returned my attention. It gave me energy and a sense of connection and eventually allowed me to regain a sense of trust in life that had been taken from me early.

S: It is that simple. I just focus on good stuff.

MO: It is little more complex than that. You let your innate desire to know the truth about the meaning of your life keep your curiosity alive and focused on what is happening, what is unfolding in each moment regardless of whether your ego value-judges it good or bad. In other words, you have to stay awake. And that is harder than it seems. It takes practice.

*Stillness. One of the doors
into the temple.*

S: Yes, it is very easy for me to get caught up in hurt feelings and wake up an hour later wondering where I have been.

MO: We as human beings have the ability to focus our attention and to stay awake or conscious. The extend you employ these capacities will shape how you experience your life. If you stay asleep you will, as the Buddha reminds us, be caught in suffering in the trance of attachments, aversions and cravings. In other words your small ego self will run your life. It is only when you are fully awake do you realize you are not your ego construct and your awareness has a chance to free you from the causes of suffering.

S: I am interested in the truth of my life, that is why I came to see you, but I am stuck.

MO: Well, if you went to a spiritual teacher they would probably tell you to develop a centering prayer or meditation practice; a practice to allow you to strengthen your ability to hold your focus of attention and let go of

conflictive thoughts and emotions. That might be good advice, but all I can share with you is my own experience.

S: Yes, your honesty is why I wanted to talk to you.

MO: My experience has been that because I found the natural world so fascinating I learned to be quiet and to see and to hear. I learned through the energy of this fascination to strengthen my ability to hold my focus of attention. I also learned in this process that nothing really has power-over anything, that the entire world is dynamically interrelated and unfolding and that I am a part of this unfolding. By connecting with this natural unfolding I came to be in communion with and to feel loved and strengthened by the natural world.

S: Can you give me an example of what you mean?

MO: Suppose you are a small animal on the floor of the forest and one day you come to realize that the oxygen you are breathing is coming from the trees around you, that the water you drink is coming from rain and streams, that your food is coming from plants you can munch on. Because you as a human have the capacity for consciousness you perceive each of these particularities of existence when you are focused on each just as the small animal might. However, as an aware human you also have the capacity to experience that the world around you is this vast complex interrelatedness that actually allows you to be supported and cared for in a way humans might call love. The first way of perceiving is called dualistic, the second non-dual. With practice we learn to strengthen this second way of perceiving.

S: Okay that helps. I think you are saying that the empowerment I believe I need does not come from an ego project of having power-over. Or being a subservient part in someone else's power-over structure. You are saying that society uses these structures all the time, but on an individual level ultimately power-over or subservient power structures cut us off from the source of real power that comes from an awareness of ourselves as part of an unfolding field of life. You are suggesting that if I really become aware I can experience the sense of belonging and empowerment I desire. My

empowerment is already here and comes from the fact that I already belong. All I need to do is wake up to my belongingness.

MO: Let me try another example. Suppose each human has the ability to perceive the world as both a remote and a tv screen. You can hang out mostly as the remote and spend all your life changing channels, that is focusing object attention on one feeling after another, or on some external task you hope will be approved by others. Or, you can be this screen of awareness that is constantly witnessing life unfolding. The more fully you are the screen the more you experience your belonging to the unfolding of life. You have a sense of inner authority which gives you agency in the world. In our totality we are both the remote and the screen, but most people stumble through life believing they are only the remote.

S: I think I am getting it; do you have another example?

MO: We perceive visually from light. Light itself is both a particle and a wave. Thus, our ability to perceive visually depends upon a medium that is two things at once. You could say light has its dualistic properties as a particle and its non-dual as a wave. Light is neither just one or the other but both depending on how it is perceived. We as humans perceive with and like light. As we grow spiritually we gain in our ability to perceive life not just as many discrete objects -- object consciousness, but as a wave -- an entire field of experience.

S: Is there some spiritual tradition that affirms this understanding of power through communion you are talking about?

MO: All the great religions in their mystical branches have this understanding that their purpose is to bring us into communion, with ourselves, other people, and the natural world. In the Christian tradition the Sermon on the Mount is all about developing this non-egoic kind of empowerment. The Sermon on the Mount asks us to embrace an openness, a vulnerable humility that allows for relationships to flourish flowing out of communion. The Beatitudes describe the blessedness of human beings who have ways of seeing the world which belong to those who are awake, who experience life through the screen that sees the interrelatedness of

everything. Jesus describes those who perceive in this way as being in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The result of seeing with Kingdom eyes is to connect us with the “communion of saints.” This is a phrase found in Christian creeds, which is rarely focused on, but embodies this idea of a deep quality of vulnerability and openness among those, living and dead, who have lived from a place outside of power-over structures. Rosa Parks and John Lewis are two of those very recently with us, who exemplify this sainted communion. From communion, this sainted place, the love from belonging we all seek always flows. In this place you are free. Rosa and John would say you are a part of the Beloved Community, which are their more modern words for the communion of saints and what I experience as communion through intimacy with the natural world.

S: Slowly, what you are saying is sinking in. But where do I start.

MO: First, you start with some practice that is going allow you to develop a capacity to perceive the world outside of the perceiving apparatus of a small self, ego structure. For many it is centering prayer or some form of meditation. For me it was slowly, gently and deeply exploring the natural world. Second, you begin to be conscious of where your focus of attention habitually goes. Does your focus of attention habitually go to what is wrong or what is missing? When your attention rivets on a thought or feeling, it’s almost like you become that thought or feeling. Your attention fuses you with the object of your attention. You have entered a trance of non-awareness or object consciousness.

Object attention is not necessarily bad. Early on I often fell into object attention just watching a creature in the wild, like an otter feed in a stream. But it takes you out of a larger field of awareness and in this sense it is disempowering. I became entranced with the otter and my experience of the world became more intense but more limited.

S: Does this intensity help you write better poems?

MO: Good question and many writers get hung up on feeling they need an intensity of experience to be able to write well, and there is no question

intensity can help one write deeply about an experience, but ultimately the great poems come from experiencing both particularity and an awareness of one's true self in the field of experience at the same time. In my poetry I have to be able to witness not just the natural world but also bear witness to an inner experience of the natural world and the bridge between them. When this occurs the trance of object consciousness has been broken and I am back experiencing from a field of consciousness. I am aware of both my outer and inner experiences. I am not in a trance to an object or to my own thoughts or feelings.

S: Wow, can you really do that? Can you experience the external world and your inner world at the same time.

MO: Sure, it is called being present. It just takes a bit of practice. Like driving and looking where you are going but occasionally glancing up at the rearview mirror. You learn to witness what is happening in the external world and in your own psyche in a continuing unfolding. This is what presence is — the experiential awareness of the field of existence of which you are apart. Creativity and great poetry occur when we experience our life from this deeper place. Witnessing consciousness allows us to experience reality from the perspective of a non-personal self, as part of a field of experience in which we are interacting. When this occurs we are present. When you are there it's effortless.

S: I think of how I perceive as a mental process, but you are saying that there is in addition to a mental perception another way to perceive reality.

MO: You are getting at what makes this hard to talk about — words by themselves are insufficient. The field experience is a whole body process of head, heart and body awareness, it is not linear or simply cognitive and so cannot be described easily in words. This is, of course, the boundary poetry tries to push. Poetry tries to describe the particular so that you experience the universal — that happens when the tools of poetry, not just words but rhythm, tone, and images combine to give a universal field experience. The poem is on one level about a grasshopper and at the same time it's about the meaning of life. Poetry and music, great art and natural beauty all entice us into the possibility of being nudged, maybe ever so slightly, out of

a linear perception to a field perception, to an experience of something greater that underlies and sustains what we experience as literal reality.

Here is a little more poetry:

*Wherever I am, the world comes after me.
It offers me its busyness. It does not believe
that I do not want it. Now I understand
why the old poets of China went so far and high
into the mountains, then crept into the pale mist.*

S: I believe I am getting it. Walking into a beautiful medieval cathedral in Europe or listening to the Messiah, I feel like they change my experience.

MO: When we are completely perceiving from being a part of the field, because perception is not from the personality the experience is perceived non-locally and the the personal self disappears. This is why a mystic will look at a sunset and experience that she is the sunset, the personal perceiving apparatus is offline, she is just the screen of witnessing consciousness and so it feels like she is what is on the screen. This is a non-dual experience and it happens only when there is such a sense of belonging and trust that the personality feels free to slide into the background. So real empowerment for anyone comes from tapping into the source of energy and nurturance that experiencing being a part of the field brings. This is not a personal power, we are empowered by the field, by life itself.

S: Now I think I am getting it, you are saying that authentic power comes from experiencing our connection with everything through field or non-dual perception and that ego attempts to be powerful usually are about power-over or subservient power structures, the dead-end forms most associated with the patriarchy.

MO: Let me quote again the lines of poetry I recited earlier:

*You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.*

You could say these lines from my poem are about how love and body awareness can help us break through linear perception to field of non-dual perception.

*That what the spirit reaches for may be eventually felt,
if not exactly understood.*

S: Is there a danger in object consciousness if the focus of attention is on something bad.

MO: Of course, a great danger. If your focus is intense externally, say on following a particular route, or internally on hurt feelings, you may not see a car coming when you cross the street. If your focus is too intense on a feeling of inadequacy, rather than witnessing that feeling and letting its energy pass through, you give the feeling of inadequacy more energy and staying power. In this sense object consciousness prevents us from witnessing the bigger field of where traffic might come from or that a feeling of inadequacy is simply a momentary feeling not who we are. We find out we are not the egoic personality that appears immediately to be who we are, but also this dynamic process of awareness that unfolds in the field of being moment to moment. Being awake to that field is powerful and creates communion. It takes us out of the personalities' self-preoccupation that blocks our entry into communion with another, life, and the realness of the moment.

S: This is very helpful. Do you have any other suggestions for me.

MO: As children we need caring power-over structures to feel safe and secure. As adults we encounter power-over structures that are barriers to inner growth. Some women respond by fighting the power over-structure or creating their own power-over structure. Many find subservient roles in a power-over structure and give up some part of themselves to feel they belong and have some power. A few, like me, are fortunate and avoid the power trap by finding meaning and belonging in communing with life itself. When we are in communion then our hearts are open and we experience the depths and heights of what being a human being is all about. We are truly alive.

*I tell you this
to break your heart,
by which I mean only
that it break open and never close again
to the rest of the world.*