

Being, Beholding, Belonging
Part II

The Poetry of Nature: Program Description

“Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting – over and over announcing your place in the family of things”

~ Mary Oliver

Poetry is a language of deep seeing that reveals dimensions of the world inaccessible to discursive thought, and so it is to poetry that we turn for our programs for middle school and high school students. Our Poetry of Nature program is a passage through three landscapes in the natural world where students listen to a poem, are asked to be fully present to the place, the moment and the feelings and images that arise within them. At each site, students are invited to find a solo spot, enter into a practice of presence, and record their inner experiences through guided writing practices. The poems and landscapes are carefully chosen to resonate with one another. The day culminates in a poetry reading after lunch where each contribution is deeply connected to the student’s experience in nature and to his/her inner life. The students read poems, ask questions, and share reflections on the day and on their sense of belonging to the natural world. This program taps a deep wellspring within young adults that rarely is accessed at school.

Program Background

We introduce the poetry of Mary Oliver during our general Poetry of Nature programs with middle school students. In addition to using Mary Oliver’s work, we also use original poetry from students who have attended our programs in the past. We have been blessed with the unique opportunity to work with the same school for 10 years that has brought out the entire 8th grade class for a Poetry of Nature Program once a year. Following each program, when they get back to school, the teacher gives them the opportunity to re-visit and to refine their own nature poems and to illustrate them. At the completion of that process, the work of the students is assembled into a book. Each year, when working with this particular school, we select and read the original poems from the poetry books published over the years and read them to the current students in the 8th grade class. Following the reading of the poem, we read the name of the author. This brings about gasps, great surprise and delight because many of the poems were written by students they know, many of them friends and family members!

Program Rhythm of the Day

Opening 9:30 am – 10:10

Introductions

The day of the program begins with a verbal expression of gratitude from the guide for all of creation followed by soothing flute music. A brief introduction is given to the Earth Sanctuary and to the credentials of the earth guides who are present.

Sitting together in a circle outdoors, we speak to the group about the idea of being consciously present to the moment in contrast to being somewhere else mentally. It is one thing to appear to be present in the body, but to have the mind elsewhere. It is another thing to be fully present in body and mind and open to the moment at that particular moment in time. The students are then asked to introduce themselves and to tell us if they are just “here” or if they are “present”. If they are “present”, we ask them, “What are you present to?” This is a wonderful way to bring in many of the facets of nature during our circle time, both inner and outer, which enlarge the experience of the introductions to each other and to the communion of subjects that have remained unnoticed thus far. Swirling smoke rising from the fire, feelings of anticipation, a cool breeze on the cheek, the smell of the smoke, the bark of a tree, a leaf fluttering to the ground, a Harvestman walking by, a rainbow spider web illuminated in the tree above and swaying trees are some of the examples of the many modes of divine presence that come to meet us through the conscious presence and deep noticing from each individual.

Introductions are followed by a reading of Mary Oliver’s poem, “Morning”.

Salt shining behind its glass cylinder:
Milk in a blue bowl. The yellow linoleum.
The cat stretching her black body from the pillow.
The way she makes her curvaceous response to the small, kind gesture.
Then laps the bowl clean.
Then wants to go out into the world
where she leaps lightly and for no apparent reason across the lawn,
then sits, perfectly still, in the grass.
I watch her a little while, thinking:
What more could I do with wild words?
I stand in the cold kitchen, bowing down to her.
I stand in the cold kitchen, everything wonderful around me.¹

¹ Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1992), p. 44.

Poetry of Nature Introduction

The Poetry of Nature introduction is intended to help the students understand the role of the poet as someone who can help them see things in new ways and in a different light, through new eyes. We can become habitual in the ways that we see and we tend to look at things in the same old ways. On this day, the students will be invited to practice seeing through the eyes of a poet. The attitude of the poet is really important. It is an attitude of wonderment. This kind of attitude can be a way of approaching the world as if you've never seen it before. In the Poetry of Nature program, we are asking the students to become poets for the day.

The natural world can be a vessel within which we access some of our deepest inspirations. Writing in an earth sanctuary, in a quiet and protected place, is a unique opportunity in which young people can receive inspiration from the natural world. How do we go about doing this? We walk and work in silence, without the typical everyday conversation that we are accustomed to. We are willing to slow down to nature's pace, without any destination in mind, and seek to come into the present moment fully.

What does it mean to live deeply in the present moment? It means that we are willing to let go of the past and of the future, and all of the drama of life, and to open all of our senses to the world around us and to the world within us. We tell the students that this is going to be a new experience for them, as it is for the adults who come to some of our programs. We know that walking in silence with your classmates is not something that you ordinarily do. Today's program is different from taking a hike in the woods. We will not be walking very far, and we will have three opportunities to sit alone and to write. The present time that we live in requires new ways of being in the world.

Once we still our bodies and our minds and come into the present moment, how do we reflect the present moment in nature with words? There are many different ways to do this. We understand that some people write easily and without prompt and that writing does not come as easily to others and they will need some structure and guidance to get started. By reading examples from former student's poetry, we introduce all of the forms that will be available to them to choose from during their solo writing time. We begin by introducing several sentence stems such as, *I am present to...*, *In the Silence.....*, and *In this Moment.....*. We then share some examples of acrostic writing forms, Haiku, and freeform writing. We finish the introduction with the idea of simply writing what they notice from the unique vantage of their sit spot. We emphasize that there is no right or wrong way to write. We tell them that they will have the chance to read what they are writing in their small groups during the morning and that everybody will be asked to share at least one poem at the end of the day, after lunch, during our large group poetry reading.

Writing in Nature 10:10 – 12:00

Materials: sit-mats, pencils, journal, watch

Overview

At each of two or three pre-selected locations, the group will be invited to stop and to become still as the guide reads a poem. The guide has already pre-chosen a poem that fits the particular

landscape where they will be stopping. Writing times range from 10 to 20 minutes per place. Several stops are built into the morning as a way to get the students comfortable with being in silence, solo writing and small group sharing. It is common to have students who are unwilling to share what they have written during the first sharing. By the second stop, they have loosened up and are often willing to share, if their peers are. The Poetry of Nature guides and the adult chaperones write and share, too. The small group sharing gives the students time to hear their own voices, re-write/reword if they want to, and gives them the courage to share at the large group reading after lunch.

Stop One:

When we come to the first stop, we stand together and the guide reads the selected poem. We then invite the students to be fully present to the moment in time and to the unique landscape where we find ourselves. How do we do this? We invite them to take a deep breath and to become very still and quiet both inwardly and outwardly. We then ask a series of questions to connect them with the landscape. What is happening here now? What kind of movement do you notice? What colors do you notice? What do you see that makes this place special? Are there any scents on the breeze or any particular smells? What sounds can be heard? What does the air feel like on your skin? Is it dry or moist? What is unseen that lives in this place? What feelings are arising inside of you? These are some of the ways that can help you come into a relationship with your surroundings. After these deep noticing practices, we invite the students to find a solo spot in the area, not near their classmates, (where they might be tempted to chat!) and to repeat the ‘coming into presence’ practices that were just shared with the small group, by themselves now, to help get them get centered and settled for their writing time. The students are reminded of the different forms that their writing might take from our morning introduction. We assure them that we are there to help them if they get stuck or need some help. We might suggest the sentence stem *I wonder* or writing the word BEHOLD vertically on the page for an acrostic poem to get them started.

The role of the guide at this time is to make sure that the students have found a place that they are able to settle down into and that is not within talking distance of their friends. We ask them to stay in sight of the guide. The guide finds a place to sit where he or she can write and keep an eye out for any student who seems to need assistance. Help is gently offered. If we see students sitting for a long time without writing, we quietly come up to them, ask them how things are going, notice their progress and offer a few suggestions to get them started. Maybe they would like to write about what they notice? What *do* they notice? Acrostics are great ways to help students enter into the process of writing when they are feeling stuck.

When it looks like the majority of students have finished writing, we ask several of them, the ones that are still writing, if they need more time and to please begin to wind down as we will be coming together for a small group sharing opportunity in a couple of minutes. Sharing is done without clapping or comments following each recitation during the small group sharing. We also encourage them not to laugh at anyone because it takes a lot of courage to share and laughing could be misconstrued. This is a tender time and great care needs to be taken in the way that students are encouraged to share. Sometimes a brave and confident individual will offer to begin, but often times the guides might need to start off the reading time with something they have composed and then go around the circle.

Stop Two: During the second carefully selected landscape and stop, we repeat the same sequence of reading a poem, practicing presence and deep noticing together, encouraging them to practice presence and deep noticing in their special solo spot, engage in writing time followed by a small group sharing. We offer the sentence stem *In the Silence* and the word LISTEN for acrostic form. We find that everyone feels more comfortable to share during this second sharing time.

Stop Three:

The third poem is read at the end of the small group sharing unless there is still time in the schedule to walk to a third location. Either way, we read the poem “Some Questions You Might Ask” by Mary Oliver:

Is the soul solid, like iron?
Or is it tender and breakable, like
The wings of a moth in the beak of the owl?
Who has it, and who doesn't?
I keep looking around me.
The face of the moose is as sad
as the face of Jesus.
The swan opens her white wings slowly.
In the fall, the black bear carries leaves into the darkness.
One question leads to another.
Does it have a shape? Like an iceberg?
Like the eye of a hummingbird?
Does it have one lung, like the snake and the scallop?
Why should I have it, and not the anteater
who loves her children?
Why should I have it, and not the camel?
Come to think of it, what about the maple trees?
What about the blue iris?
What about all the little stones, sitting alone in the moonlight?
What about roses, and lemons, and their shining leaves?
What about the grass?²

The students are then invited to write down at least 3 of their own questions. This does not take a lot of time and when they have each written at least 3 questions, we sit in a circle and take turns reading them one at a time in the round. This prepares them for the grand finale of the Poetry of Nature poetry reading after lunch where we repeat this process of reading one question at a time with a large group of 24 or more students and teachers.

² Ibid, p. 65

Lunch
12:00-1:00

Group Sharing
1:00-1:30

We have an area that is already set up and ready for the poetry reading that follows lunch. We arrange chairs in a large oval where everyone can see and hear each other.

We begin the afternoon with some flute music. Following that, we begin the poetry reading by going around the circle, one after the other. The students are invited to read slowly and a little bit louder than usual so that everyone can hear them. Following each reading, there will be no clapping or laughing. There will be silence until the next person reads. We encourage them all to take a deep breath after each reading before they follow by reading their own work. Creating a safe place for everyone to share is very important. We have had 100 % participation with over 300 students in our Poetry of Nature program, working in these ways.

Closing: Questions

Each person in the circle is asked to speak his or her question out loud. We usually go around the circle for three rounds of questions.

Suggested poems from Mary Oliver's *New and Selected Poems*:

“The Ponds” (p. 92)

“Landscape” (p. 129)

“Wild Geese” (p.110)