

GRACE IS OFTEN UNEXPECTED

Chad Thralls

HAVE YOU EVER become a prisoner of your own expectations? I have. It is far too easy for me, and I imagine for many others, to focus on elements of life that do not measure up to our hopes and dreams. Many people's lives have not unfolded as wonderfully as they had hoped. Often, this comes from the failure to find a job that uses our skills and passions. Or we may feel trapped in a place that is far from the people we care about the most. We may long for more from our flawed church communities—though we realise that we dearly need them, with all their limitations.

People in these kinds of situations may find it difficult to read Romans 8:28: 'We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose'. Is that really true? To those trapped by their expectations, this passage might sound hopelessly naïve and leave a feeling of incredulity.

Hailing from the mountains of West Virginia in the southern USA, I recently moved to the Bronx, New York, for a new job. Although my neighbourhood has two tiny parks with trees, I still suffer from nature deficit disorder while living here. Fortunately, the neighbourhood is graced by being a few blocks south of the New York Botanical Garden, a horticultural jewel. A river runs through its forest, gardens are studded with brightly coloured annuals and perennials, an enormous rose garden blooms, and a wide variety of native and exotic plants are displayed seasonally.

On Wednesdays the garden graciously opens its gates for free. So, ever since I arrived in the Bronx, I go there as a spiritual practice. On my first visits I made a beeline for a spot on the stone bridge over the Bronx River where I can see a small waterfall and be absorbed in the sound of



Waterfall, New York Botanical Garden, the Bronx

the water crashing on to the rocks beneath. In this rejuvenating spot, the city seems miles away. Later, I ventured out to see what else the garden has to offer.

As I roam the grounds of this urban oasis, I notice the unexpected. Growing up in West Virginia, I thought I knew what squirrels looked like. But they have dark brown squirrels in the garden, a squirrel-colour I'd never seen before. As I was taking in the view one day, two red birds arrived in the tree right in front of my bench to play, seemingly just for me. Spring is a spectacular season to visit the garden. I have loved tulips for years, but I saw so many varieties this past spring, and in such lovely arrangements, that it was like seeing them for the first time.

In her Pulitzer Prize winning book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard tells a story from when she was six or seven. At that age, she was fond of taking pennies and hiding them for others to find. She revelled in placing them along the same stretch of pavement near her house. After she had hidden the penny, she would,

... take a piece of chalk, and, starting at either end of the block, draw huge arrows leading up to the penny from both directions. After I learned to write, I labeled the arrows: SURPRISE AHEAD, or MONEY THIS WAY.¹

¹ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper, 2007), 14.

Much as God does, Dillard left little bits of grace in people's paths for them to find. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is largely about a year she spent observing a creek near her house in western Virginia. The book concerns the efforts and rewards of observation, attention and seeing:

There are lots of things to see, unwrapped gifts and free surprises. The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside by a generous hand. But—and this is the point—who gets excited by a mere penny?²

Another Pulitzer Prize winner, the poet Mary Oliver, has taught me volumes about how to look at the world. In her poetry she carefully details the natural environment around her home in Provincetown, Massachusetts. She lovingly describes the trees, ponds, owls and swans that she encounters as she rambles around on her daily walks. At times she receives ecstatic moments of connection, gifts that reveal the life-giving power of beauty and wildness. In some of her most powerful poems, she turns midstream from description to exhort her readers to search for the kind of joy and holiness that she has experienced in her devotion to nature.

Oliver encourages her readers to stop and pay attention to the world around them. In a recent interview, the shy writer referred to herself as a 'praise poet'. She explained this by saying that 'I acknowledge my feeling and gratitude for life by praising the world and whoever made all these things'.³ In her poetry, she expresses praise and gratitude for the natural world, a holy place for her.

Attention is a central spiritual practice for Oliver. Her poems are products of her keen attentiveness to nature. Oliver's God is immanent in creation and she considers attending to the natural world around her to be a form of prayer. In her poem 'The Summer Day' she explains that, though she is unsure exactly what a prayer should be, she is blessed through the practice of slowing down and paying attention as she walks through the grass and the fields. She further explores her understanding of the connection between attention and prayer in 'Praying'. Here she gives advice to someone trying to compose a prayer. This is not simply

² Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 15.

³ 'Mary Shriver Interviews Famously Private Poet Mary Oliver', *O, the Oprah Magazine* (9 March 2011), 3, at <http://www.oprah.com/entertainment/Maria-Shriver-Interviews-Poet-Mary-Oliver/3>, accessed 29 August 2012.

words of praise for spectacularly beautiful things such as flowers, sunsets or mountains. A prayer can express gratitude for whatever we see before us, whether it be weeds or random stones under our feet. The important thing is to come up with a few simple words of thanksgiving because, as she says, doing so opens us to the mystery beyond our day-to-day existence.

When we dwell on the negative, we lose hope that things can turn out differently from the way we expect. But when we pay attention, we can be surprised. One message contained in Mary Oliver's poetry is that if we hang around long enough with our eyes open, we will see the unexpected. This is true when it comes to nature, and I believe it is true in the rest of life as well. Grace certainly is conveyed through the liturgical acts of the Church. But grace is also a wild thing that is not confined within the walls of our churches. It is in creation, our institutions, our relationships and our hearts. Just as there is treasure everywhere for Annie Dillard, so too is grace all around us.

If we believe that we already know how things are going to turn out, they will probably meet our negative expectations. If we expect a disappointing outcome, it will probably come to pass. But if we open our eyes and truly pay attention, grace may surprise us. One of the ways we nurture hope is by being open to the unexpected. Mary Oliver reminds us that grace is as close as the forest, the seashore and the animals that exist at the peripheries of our urban and suburban lives. If we are open to new possibilities, God can suddenly show us how small the prisons are where we have locked ourselves in, and we can read Romans 8:28 without shaking our heads. Instead we can read it as a message of faith, a word reminding us that there is goodness in being with God—a goodness that is not the same as our life plans working out according to our own schedules. When we look at the world without expectation, we open ourselves to new ways of encountering the grace that is all around us.

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