

**SUNDAY CIRCLE – MAY 17, 2026**

**THE BAND OF SISTERHOOD**

**MARY OLIVER** (1935–2019) was famously private and accustomed to her ways of working as a poet, writing often about how she walked with pad and pen at dawn every day through the woods and along the shoreline of Provincetown, and later in Hobe Sound, Florida. Oliver was never afraid to use certain words in her poems. Cover your ears, for you may be offended. Her language includes nouns and adjectives like beautiful, love, beloved, prayer, loneliness, God, holy, and heaven. She regularly used just such decidedly accessible, non-academic words in her poems, ones that may seem blasphemous in contemporary poetry. They came from the pen of a woman who taught at Bennington College, was a lesbian, wrote scholarly essays on Poe and Whitman and Hopkins, and derided figures like former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in poems.

Her poems included images of chirping birds and receding ocean tides, lilies bobbing in the sun, soon to be dissolved onto the tongues of cows and hovering hummingbirds seeking nectar. Even her stanzas appear well-balanced and harmonious on the printed page. And while her poems always present a mélange of meanings, rarely does a reader leave one of her works baffled or frustrated.

**Why I Wake Early** by Mary Oliver

Hello, sun in my face.  
Hello, you who make the morning  
and spread it over the fields  
and into the faces of the tulips  
and the nodding morning glories,  
and into the windows of, even, the  
miserable and crotchety–

best preacher that ever was,  
dear star, that just happens  
to be where you are in the universe  
to keep us from ever-darkness,  
to ease us with warm touching,  
to hold us in the great hands of light—  
good morning, good morning, good morning.

Watch, now, how I start the day  
in happiness, in kindness.

**MAYA ANGELOU** Poet, dancer, singer, activist, and scholar Maya Angelou was a world-famous author. She was best known for her unique and pioneering autobiographical writing style.

On April 4, 1928, Marguerite Ann Johnson, known to the world as Maya Angelou, was born in St. Louis, Missouri. Due to her parents' tumultuous marriage and subsequent divorce, Angelou went to live with her paternal grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas at an early age. Her older brother, Bailey, gave Angelou her nickname "Maya."

Returning to her mother's care briefly at the age of seven, Angelou was raped by her mother's boyfriend. He was later jailed and then killed when released from jail. Believing that her confession of the trauma had a hand in the man's death, Angelou became mute for six years. During her mutism and into her teens, she again lived with her grandmother in Arkansas.

Angelou's interest in the written word and the English language was evident from an early age. Throughout her childhood, she wrote essays, poetry, and kept a journal. When she returned to Arkansas, she took an interest in poetry and memorized works by Shakespeare and Poe.

Prior to the start of World War II, Angelou moved back in with her mother, who at this time was living in Oakland, California. She attended George Washington High School and took dance and drama courses at the California Labor School.

When war broke out, Angelou applied to join the Women's Army Corps. However, her application was rejected because of her involvement in the California Labor School, which was said to have Communist ties. Determined to gain employment, despite being only 15 years old, she decided to apply for the position of a streetcar conductor. Many men had left their jobs to join the services, enabling women to fill them. However, Angelou was barred from applying at first because of her race. But she was undeterred. Every day for three weeks, she requested a job application, but was denied. Finally, the company relented and handed her an application. Because she was under the legal working age, she wrote that she was 19. She was accepted for the position and became the first African American woman to work as a streetcar conductor in San Francisco. Angelou was employed for a semester but then decided to return to school. She graduated from Mission High School in the summer of 1944 and soon after gave birth to her only child, Clyde Bailey (Guy) Johnson.

After graduation, Angelou undertook a series of odd jobs to support herself and her son. In 1949, she married Tosh Angelos, an electrician in the US Navy. She adopted a form of his surname and kept it throughout her life, though the marriage ended in divorce in 1952.

She was recognized by many organizations both nationally and internationally for her contributions to literature. In 1981, Wake Forest University offered Angelou the Reynolds Professorship of American Studies. President Clinton awarded Angelou the National Medal of Arts in 2000. In 2012, she was a member of the inaugural class inducted into the Wake Forest University Writers Hall of Fame. The following year, she received the National Book Foundation's Literarian Award for outstanding service to the American literary community. Angelou also gave many commencement speeches and was awarded more than 30 honorary degrees in her lifetime.

## Uncle Willie by Maya Angelou

Willie was a man without fame,  
Hardly anybody knew his name.  
Crippled and limping, always walking lame,  
He said, "I keep on movin' Movin' just the same."

Solitude was the climate in his head,  
Emptiness was the partner in his bed,  
Pain echoed in the steps of his tread,  
He said, "I keep on followin' Where the leaders led."

"I may cry and I will die,  
But my spirit is the soul of every spring,  
Watch for me and you will see  
That I'm present in the songs that children sing."

People called him "Uncle," "Boy" and "Hey,"  
Said, "You can't live through this another day."  
Then, they waited to hear what he would say.  
He said, "I'm living In the games that children play."

"You may enter my sleep, people my dreams,  
Threaten my early morning's ease,  
But I keep comin' followin' laughin' cryin',  
Sure as a summer breeze."

"Wait for me, watch for me.  
My spirit is the surge of open seas.  
Look for me, ask for me,  
I'm the rustle in the autumn leaves.  
"When the sun rises I am the time.  
When the children sing I am the Rhyme."

## The Journey by Mary Oliver

One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began,  
though the voices around you  
kept shouting  
their bad advice—  
though the whole house  
began to tremble  
and you felt the old tug  
at your ankles.  
“Mend my life!”  
each voice cried.  
But you didn’t stop.  
You knew what you had to do,  
though the wind pried  
with its stiff fingers  
at the very foundations,  
though their melancholy  
was terrible.  
It was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen  
branches and stones.  
But little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice  
which you slowly  
recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do—  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.

## **I HAPPEN TO BE STANDING** by Mary Oliver

I don't know where prayers go,  
or what they do.  
Do cats pray, while they sleep  
half-asleep in the sun?  
Does the opossum pray as it  
crosses the street?  
The sunflowers? The old black oak  
growing older every year?  
I know I can walk through the world,  
along the shore or under the trees,  
with my mind filled with things of little importance,  
in full self-attendance.  
A condition I can't really call being alive  
Is a prayer a gift, or a petition, or does it matter?  
The sunflowers blaze,  
maybe that's their way.  
Maybe the cats are sound asleep. Maybe not.  
While I was thinking this I happened to be standing  
just outside my door, with my notebook open,  
which is the way I begin every morning.  
Then a wren in the privet began to sing.  
He was positively drenched in enthusiasm,  
I don't know why. And yet, why not?  
I wouldn't persuade you from whatever you believe  
or whatever you don't. That's your business.  
But I thought of the wren's singing, what could this be  
if it isn't a prayer?  
So I just listened, my pen in the air.

## **A Brave and Startling Truth** by Maya Angelou

We, this people, on a small and lonely planet  
Traveling through casual space  
Past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent suns  
To a destination where all signs tell us  
It is possible and imperative that we learn  
A brave and startling truth

And when we come to it  
To the day of peacemaking  
When we release our fingers  
From fists of hostility  
And allow the pure air to cool our palms

When we come to it  
When the curtain falls on the minstrel show of hate  
And faces sooted with scorn are scrubbed clean  
When battlefields and coliseum  
No longer rake our unique and particular sons and daughters  
Up with the bruised and bloody grass  
To lie in identical plots in foreign soil

When the rapacious storming of the churches  
The screaming racket in the temples have ceased  
When the pennants are waving gaily  
When the banners of the world tremble  
Stoutly in the good, clean breeze

When we come to it  
When we let the rifles fall from our shoulders  
And children dress their dolls in flags of truce  
When land mines of death have been removed  
And the aged can walk into evenings of peace  
When religious ritual is not perfumed  
By the incense of burning flesh  
And childhood dreams are not kicked awake

By nightmares of abuse

When we come to it  
Then we will confess that not the Pyramids  
With their stones set in mysterious perfection  
Nor the Gardens of Babylon  
Hanging as eternal beauty  
In our collective memory  
Not the Grand Canyon  
Kindled into delicious color  
By Western sunsets

Nor the Danube, flowing its blue soul into Europe  
Not the sacred peak of Mount Fuji  
Stretching to the Rising Sun  
Neither Father Amazon nor Mother Mississippi who, without favor,  
Nurture all creatures in the depths and on the shores  
These are not the only wonders of the world

When we come to it  
We, this people, on this minuscule and kithless globe  
Who reach daily for the bomb, the blade and the dagger  
Yet who petition in the dark for tokens of peace  
We, this people on this mote of matter  
In whose mouths abide cankerous words  
Which challenge our very existence  
Yet out of those same mouths  
Come songs of such exquisite sweetness  
That the heart falters in its labor  
And the body is quieted into awe

We, this people, on this small and drifting planet  
Whose hands can strike with such abandon  
That in a twinkling, life is sapped from the living  
Yet those same hands can touch with such healing, irresistible tenderness  
That the haughty neck is happy to bow  
And the proud back is glad to bend  
Out of such chaos, of such contradiction

We learn that we are neither devils nor divines

When we come to it

We, this people, on this wayward, floating body

Created on this earth, of this earth

Have the power to fashion for this earth

A climate where every man and every woman

Can live freely without sanctimonious piety

Without crippling fear

When we come to it

We must confess that we are the possible

We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world

That is when, and only when

We come to it.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR SUNDAY CIRCLE**

**WHEN I WAKE EARLY MARY OLIVER**

- 1. WHAT IMAGES OF GOD IN NATURE SPEAK TO YOU THE MOST IN THIS POEM? WHAT DOES HER DESCRIPTION OF GOD THE PREACHER TELL YOU?2.**
- 2. HOW DOES THE POEM, IT'S SONG TO ALL CREATION FEED YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD?**

**THE JOURNEY MARY OLIVER**

- 1. MARY OLIVER SPEAKS OF THE JOURNEY OF FINDING ONE'S TRUE SELF IN THIS POEM, HOW DOES THAT REFLECT YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S PURPOSE FOR EACH ONE OF US?**
- 2. IS THERE A CONTRADICTION WITH JESUS' COMMAND THAT WE SHOULD SERVE ONE ANOTHER IN LOVE?**

**I HAPPENED TO BE STANDING MARY OLIVER**

- 1. MARY SAYS PRAYER IS A GIFT OR AN OFFERING. HOW DOES THAT REFLECT YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF PRAYING?**
- 2. SHE SAYS' THAT I WOULDN'T PERSUADE YOU ABOUT WHAT YOU BELIEVE, THAT'S YOUR BUSINESS'. IS GOD THE GOD OF ALL PEOPLE, ALL BELIEFS OR DO WE NEED TO BE EVANGELISTS, PERSUADING OTHERS THAT JESUS IS THE ONLY WAY?**
- 3. HOW DO THE PRAYERS OF GOD'S CREATION, THE ANIMALS, THE PLANTS FIGURE IN YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF GOD?**

**UNCLE WILLIE**

**MAYA ANGELOU**

**1. THE REFRAIN OF THIS POEM GOES BACK CONTINUALLY TO 'I KEEP ON MOVING', 'I KEEP ON COMING' WHERE DO YOU SEE THIS PERSISTANCE IN GOD'S ACTIONS? IN SCRIPTURE? IN GOD'S PEOPLE AND WILL FOR HIS PEOPLE?**

**2. WHERE DO YOU SEE/KNOW GOD IN THE 'SPIRIT OF EVERY SPRING'? HOW DOES IT FEEL?**

**BRAVE AND STARTLING TRUTH**

**1. HOW DOES ANGELOU BRING THE 'DAY OF THE LORD' INTO THIS POEM OF A HOPEFUL HUMANINTY?**

**2. DO YOU SEE YOURSELF 'WHEN YOU COME TO IT' AS THE WONDER OF THE WORLD? CREATION? ARE YOU BEING TRANSFORMED TO PEACE?**