

# Reflections & Poems

## Readings

**Richard Feynman**, physicist and educator

"You see, one thing is, I can live with doubt and uncertainty and not knowing. I think it is much more interesting to live not knowing than to have answers which might be wrong. I have approximate answers and possible beliefs and different degrees of certainty about different things, but I'm not absolutely certain of anything, and there are many things I don't know anything about, such as whether it means anything to ask why we're here. I don't have to know an answer. The question is not whether it is true or false but how likely it is to be true or false. We absolutely must leave room for doubt or there is no progress and there is no learning. There is no learning without having to pose a question. People are terrified. They think how can you live and not know? It is not odd at all. You only think that you know. It is possible to live and not know. I don't feel frightened by not knowing things, by being lost in a mysterious universe without any purpose, which is the way it really is as far as I can tell. It doesn't frighten me"

**What Is There Beyond Knowing** by **Mary Oliver**, poet

What is there beyond knowing that keeps calling to me?  
I can't turn in any direction but it's there.

I don't mean the leaves grip and shine or even the thrush's silk song,  
But the far-off fires, for example, of the stars,  
Heaven's slowly turning theater of light,  
Or the wind playful with its breath;

Or time that's always rushing forward,  
or standing still in the same – what shall I say – moment.

What I know I could put into a pack as if it were bread and cheese,  
And carry it on one shoulder, important and honorable, but so small!  
While everything else continues, unexplained and unexplainable.

How wonderful it is to follow a thought quietly to its logical end.  
I have done this a few times.  
But mostly I just stand in the dark field, in the middle of the world,  
Breathing in and out.  
Life so far doesn't have any other name but breath and light, wind and rain.

If there's a temple, I haven't found it yet.  
I simply go on drifting, in the heaven of the grass and the weeds.

**Bumper Sticker**

~ **I'M A MILITANT AGNOSTIST** ~  
**I don't know and you don't either**

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## Responsive Reading

### **Out Of The Stars** by Robert Weston, UU minister

Out of the stars in their flight, out of the dust of eternity, here we have come,  
Stardust and sunlight, mingling through time and through space.

Out of the stars have we come, up from time;

Out of the stars have we come.

Time out of time before time in the vastness of space, earth spun to orbit the sun,  
Earth with the thunder of mountains newborn, the boiling of seas.

Earth warmed by the sun, lit by sunlight:

This is our home; out of the stars we have come.

Mystery hidden in mystery, back through all time;

Mystery rising from rocks in the storm and the sea.

Out of the stars, rising from rocks and the sea,

Kindled by sunlight on earth, arose life.

Ponder this thing in your heart, ponder with awe:

Out of the sea to the land, out of the shallows came ferns.

Out of the sea to the land, up from darkness to light,

Rising to walk and to fly, out of the sea trembled life.

Ponder this thing in your heart, life up from the sea:

Eyes to behold, throats to sing, mates to love.

Life from the sea, warmed by sun, washed by rain,

Life from within, giving birth, rose to love.

This is the wonder of time; this is the marvel of space;

Out of the stars swung the earth; life upon earth rose to love.

This is the marvel of life, rising to see and to know;

Out of your heart, cry wonder: sing that we live.

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Over the last few hundred years we humans have been dealt some humiliating blows to our collective egos and notions of our place in the universe. Once our earth was the center of the universe – now the earth is a mere satellite around an insignificant sun in a remote outer arm of our Milky Way galaxy, one of billions of such galaxies. Once we were the crowning glory of creation - made in God's image – now we are just another product of evolution and closely related to even the lowest forms of life. But – we are here. Of all the species that have ever lived on earth, over 99.9% are now extinct – one of evolution's dead-ends. So to be here is quite an achievement. Out of the stars and out of the sea arose life and here we are, and at least, the end product of that evolution – or so we'd like to think.

To quote the anthropologist, Stephen Jay Gould:

*"Humans are here today because our particular line never fractured, never once at any of the billion points that could have erased us from history..... One of the hardest ideas for humans to accept is that we are not the culmination of anything. There is nothing inevitable about our being here. It is part of our vanity as humans that we tend to think of evolution as a process that, in effect, was programmed to produce us."*

Perhaps one last place upon which we might hang our egos is our human brains, minds and consciousness – after all, that is what make us humans so special, isn't it? However, much is happening in the field of cognitive neuroscience to question our 'specialness.' Functional MRIs and other tools are helping us correlate brain and mind in increasing detail, mapping specific mental states to certain complexes of neurons. It now appears that cognitive neuroscience, molecular biology and quantum physics may ultimately be able to explain mind and all our mental activity as phenomena emergent entirely from the brain. This would then lead to the total naturalization of humanity; that is to realize that we - our bodies, our consciousness, our spirits, our souls - are a part of nature like everything else – no more, no less. To see the wonders of consciousness and mind, not as something separate and apart – the old Cartesian mind-body dualism, but as part of the very fabric and essence of life, for me, only enhances the grandeur and wonder of life.

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### 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 the roses, and lemons, and their shining leaves?  
What about the grass?

None of us asked to be here. As our consciousness and self-awareness matures, we realize that, in many ways, we are alone in a huge and awful universe. Despite our aloneness our deepest selves are not individual – they're relational. We do not live alone. Those closest to us and the rest of humanity are central to meaning and purpose in our existence. Not only are we formed by our interactions with others, in many ways we are that interaction – that network of relations. "Who Are We and Whose Are We?"

So what should our posture be toward this life in which we find ourselves? I'm sure you all realize that most of us in this room have a much greater share of wealth, health and opportunity than most of the rest of humanity. It is easy to credit our successes and lives to our own efforts, in our education, our work, with our families and with all those with whom we interact – to take all of that for granted. Yet when ill fortune strikes, we can often feel that we have been badly mistreated by fate and the gods – as though we are somehow entitled to the good in our lives but couldn't possibly deserve the bad. Clearly gratitude is in order for our gifts, our talents and our opportunities. It is our actions exercising our talents and seizing our opportunities that give meaning and make sense of our lives. Our misfortunes and challenges need to be seen in the larger context of the whole of our existence – we do learn and grow through our misfortunes and failures. It is far better that we feel and express our gratitude for all of life, good and bad, than fall prey to bitterness or resignation. This gratitude need not be directed to anyone or any entity in particular but to life itself. Genuine gratitude for the gift of life provides perspective, context and meaning. And we need to live in the here and now – we need to be present to this life.

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### Poem by E.E. Cummings

i thank You God for most this amazing  
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees  
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything  
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,  
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth  
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay  
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing  
breathing any – lifted from the no  
of all nothing – human merely being  
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and  
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

The meaning of life has been a fundamental question from the earliest philosophers and theologians to our current authors and thinkers - even Monty Python. The realization of our eventual and inevitable death focuses this search for meaning in our all too brief existence.

Each one of us is the responsible meaning maker for our own lives – we cannot shift that burden to God or nature or those around us. You must discover and create meaning and purpose for yourself – to take it from another is to be little more than a puppet. Most cultures and religions claim supernatural or divine sources of meaning and rules of behavior, properly interpreted by human intermediaries, of course, which are then packaged and offered for your consumption. Acceptance of a package of theology and ethics is typically the price of admission to the group. Granted, there is much wisdom and good within the major religions that is worthy of our consideration. Consideration and examination are, however, essential. As Socrates is quoted by Plato, "The unexamined life is not worth living."

Much of our time and attention is devoted to our daily lives and its duties, challenges and rewards. There are times, however, when we transcend the daily and mundane and find ourselves transported to another place: the sight of a newborn baby, a beautiful sunset, a Bach chorale, falling in love. This awful universe can fill us with awe when we are open to it. Those moments can move us to feelings of wonder, reverence, praise and gratitude. These emotions, while often labeled as 'religious', can lead to a deep and wholly natural spirituality without reference to the supernatural. A favorite poem of mine speaks to this:

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**White Heron** by John Ciardi:

What lifts the heron leaning on the air,  
I praise without a name. A crouch, a flare,  
a long stroke though the cumulus of trees,  
a shaped thought at the sky – then gone. O rare!  
Saint Francis, being happiest on his knees,  
would have cried Father! Cry anything you please,

But praise. By any name or none. But praise  
the white original burst that lights  
the heron on his two soft kissing kites.  
When saints praise heaven lit by doves and rays,  
I sit by pond scums 'til the air recites  
its heron back. And doubt all else. But praise.

So how do we arrive at meaning and purpose in our lives? Many years ago I found a tee shirt that I brought with me today that says "The meaning of life is to give life meaning." Some religious traditions stress that the purpose of this life is to qualify for a next one – an afterlife. That, however, just begs the question of what the purpose of that next life might be. For many of us our lives are here and now - our heavens and hells are here and now – this life is not a dress rehearsal. Even if a creator had engineered our lives, as some claim, how are we to discern its purpose without deep and continuing examination of our lives? Unless we are willing to accept a package, we have some work to do – in fact, we have a lifelong effort.

If we can resist the temptation of easy answers for our questions just to have the comfort of those answers, regardless of their value or validity, we can then free ourselves to pursue a deeper search for more meaningful answers.

As science has continued to expand our knowledge of the universe and ourselves, many of the phenomena formerly attributed to supernatural causes have become explainable by science. The propensity to credit God or supernatural forces as explanations for the unknown or the mysterious, sometimes referred to as "God of the Gaps" clearly adds nothing to our knowledge or our understanding - in fact, it associates God with ignorance. If God, truth or meaning is to be found it must certainly be through what we discover about the universe, not what we fail to discover.

To continue our search for truth and meaning while graciously accepting our human limitations can give rise to a genuine humility and a greater sensitivity, respect and reverence for the world around us and all of its inhabitants.

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### The Summer Day by Mary Oliver

Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean—  
the one who flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?

So here we are – here in a mysterious and all too brief existence – our “one wild and precious life.” It is a marvelous gift, to be sure – but what does it all mean? Well, that is for us to determine – we decide as demonstrated by what we do and what we don't do. While we continue our search for purpose and meaning we don't have to do that alone. We are relational and live in community with others where we connect, relate, grow and become more fully human – more fully the person we can be. Our human natures encompass a huge spectrum of potential - from violence and hatred to generosity, creativity and love.

- We determine the aspects of our nature that we choose to nurture.
- We determine the meaning and purpose that informs our lives and relationships.
- We determine which of the paths open to us we take in life.

“We cannot direct the winds but we can adjust our sails”

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### **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.

### **Benediction** - From **The Summer Day** by **Mary Oliver**

.....  
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I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?