

Morning Prayers at Memorial Church in Harvard Yard  
Remarks  
January 31, 2018

Our morning's reading is the poem Wild Geese published by Mary Oliver in her 1986 volume Dream Work.

Wild Geese

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.  
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
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.

Finding this poem in 1986 was an important moment for me. I had immigrated from India just six years earlier. As an MIT undergraduate studying electrical engineering, drinking from a firehose as they say, I was in the process of defining my boundaries. Where my parents ended and I began. Where certainty ended and risk began.

I took a single course at Harvard – Sanskrit from Professor Michael Witzel in Widener Library. I was surprised and disappointed when my advisor suggested that taking courses off campus might not be the best use of my time – it would take time away from engineering.

But it is when you are drinking from a firehose that you really need poetry. That mental space, the distance, the use of someone else's words to capture one's experience. I read Mary Oliver and a whole bunch of poets with a thirst I did not know I had. This poem gave me permission not to walk on my knees through the desert. It offered me grace and forgiveness.

Poetry was for me a way to connect with the liberal arts and later with other fields of study. The story of my life has been remarkably unpredictable. Two years ago, if you had predicted that I would be giving remarks at the podium in Memorial Church in Harvard Yard, I would have laughed loud and long.

The twists and turns have been quite something. The world has definitely opened itself up to my imagination. And it has done so again and again. And I have been careful to say yes. To throw my hat in the ring. And walk through any open doors.

What I wanted to do in life is so very different from what I have done. What I do today is incredibly hard to describe. I learn something new every day. My work changes substantially every few months. I am still in disbelief walking into my office in the Widener library– full circle from attending class here in 1986.

The world is indeed harsh and exciting. Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine. Another phrase that has resonated over the years. When I share my despair with you, your response can lighten my load. When I listen to your despair, I might be able to return the favor. The ability to talk about my problems, reveal my insecurities and weaknesses – this has not been easy for me. But I am working on this, and I hope to get better over time.

I end with the wild geese, high in the clean blue air. The sense of hope, of wide open spaces and of a clear horizon. A mentor of mine who cares deeply about the environment gave me a single sentence of wisdom at a time of crisis. He said to me: “Do not limit your own horizons.” When I face imposter syndrome, which happens often, I repeat his phrase to myself. I remind myself that I do not know what the future holds, and as Von Goethe has said, in all things, it is better to hope than to despair.

As Emily Dickinson writes, Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul. Let us pray that the wild geese continue to migrate each spring and each fall, and that they help us understand our place and the role we can play to improve our world.