

# The Mystery & Miracle of Life



*A religious naturalist service  
of mindfulness meditation*

## Wild Geese by Mary Oliver

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.

## What I Have Learned So Far by Mary Oliver

Meditation is old and honorable, so why should I  
not sit, every morning of my life, on the hillside,  
looking into the shining world? Because, properly  
attended to, delight, as well as havoc, is suggestion.  
Can one be passionate about the just, the  
ideal, the sublime, and the holy, and yet commit  
to no labor in its cause? I don't think so.

All summations have a beginning, all effect has a  
story, all kindness begins with the sown seed.  
Thought buds toward radiance. The gospel of  
light is the crossroads of – indolence, or action.

Be ignited, or be gone.

# The Mystery & Miracle of Life

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¶ *The service leader invites those gathered to rest together for a while in silence. Following the silence the service leader says the following words and those gathered respond with the words in **bold italics**:*

Out of a community of diverse heritage and belief,

***we come together to share our hope,  
and to create good in the world.***

The teachers of all traditions and times have taught that we are called to mercy, generosity, and mutual care

***and that to be good is to serve.***

We know that there can be no enduring happiness for humanity so long as suffering and want go unrelieved;

***until all may be sheltered, none of us is truly at home.***

May the power of our various faiths sustain us in this work, that we may be the hands of holy creativity and justice;

***and together build a better world.***

Kendyl Gibbons, adapted

***Love is the doctrine of this church,  
The quest of truth is our sacrament,  
and service is our prayer.  
To dwell together in peace,  
To seek knowledge in freedom,  
To serve others in community,  
To the end that all souls shall grow  
Into harmony with nature,  
Thus do we covenant with one another.***

¶ *The service leader then lights a candle with the following words:*

O light of life, be kindled again in our hearts

As we meet together at this time,

To celebrate the joy of human community,

Seeking a wholeness that extends beyond ourselves.

Samuel A. Trumbore

¶ *The service leader invites those gathered to say the following responsive reading:*

A planet is born, a spark ignites,  
something completely new comes  
into being;

*we give thanks for the mystery  
and miracle of life.*

A waterfall descends, a rainbow arcs  
through the sky, the ocean opens  
to an endless horizon;

*we give thanks for the mystery  
and miracle of beauty.*

The stars pierce our hearts,  
peace envelops us, we are blessed;

*we give thanks for the mystery  
and miracle of wonder.*

In the midst of pain, we find our  
way to hope and restoration;

*we give thanks for the mystery  
and miracle of healing.*

In the midst of fear, we do what is  
right and speak our truth in faith;

*we give thanks for the mystery  
and miracle of courage.*

In our aloneness we see someone in  
greater need and offer ourselves to them;

*we give thanks for the mystery  
and miracle of compassion.*

We gather in community,  
in friendship, and cherish each other;

*we give thanks for the mystery  
and miracle of love.*

¶ *The service leader then invites those gathered to join together in time of mindful meditation. This meditation lasts about twenty-five minutes and is concluded by ringing a bell three times.*



## A time of mindful meditation



¶ *A short reading followed by a piece of music.*

¶ *Candles of Joy and Concern. At this point in the service you may light a candle and speak briefly of a joy and/or concern in your life. If you do not wish to light a candle please simply remain seated and the service leader will continue the service when it becomes clear no other candles are going to be lit.*

¶ *The service leader lights a final candle and says:*

We remember that we have lit these candles as symbols of our desire to heal and not to harm, to bless and not to curse, and to give thanks for the mystery and miracle of life.

¶ *A song, hymn or chant is sung or a piece of music is played.*

¶ *The service leader invites those gathered to say the following words:*

***Let us be at peace with our bodies and our minds. Let us return to ourselves and become wholly ourselves.***

***Let us be aware of the source of being, common to us all and to all living things.***

***Evoking the presence of the Great Compassion, let us fill our hearts with our own compassion—towards ourselves and towards all living beings.***

***Let us pray that we ourselves cease to be the cause of suffering to each other.***

***With humility, with awareness of the existence of life, and of the sufferings that are going on around us, let us practise the establishment of peace in our hearts and on earth.***

¶ *The service leader continues with the following words:*

The inner spirit makes us feel that behind every appearance of diversity there is an interdependent unity of all things. Let us, therefore, preach the universal and everlasting gospel of boundless, universal love for the entire human race, without exception, and for each one in particular.

George de Benneville (1703–1793), adapted

And, in the end, it will not matter how much we have, rather how much we have given. It will not matter how much we know, but rather how much we love. And it will not matter how much we profess to believe, but rather how deeply we live the few enduring truths we claim as ultimate. All the rest is discipline.

John Morgan

¶ *Those gathered then say responsively the following words:*

This making of a whole self takes such a very long time: pieces are not sequential, nor our supplies.

***We work here, then there, hold up tattered fabric to the light. Sew past dark, intent. Use all our thread.***

Sleeves may come before length; buttons, before a rounded neck.

***We sew at what most needs us, and as it asks, sew again.***

The self is not one thing, once made, unaltered. Not midnight task alone, not after other work.

***It is everything we come upon, make ours: all this fitting of what-once-was and has-become.***

Nancy Shaffer

¶ *The service leader concludes the service by saying:*

Go in peace, speak the truth, give thanks each day.

Respect the earth and her creatures, for they are alive like you.

Care for your body; it is a wondrous gift.

Live simply. Be of service.

Be guided by your faith and not your fear.

Go lightly on your path. Walk in a sacred manner. Amen.

Gary Kowalski



# Who is a Religious Naturalist?

## What is the common understanding of being religious?

Most traditional religions have a core narrative (a mythos, a large story), usually recorded in texts or oral accounts. Interpretations of each account are embedded in the mythos and elaborated by clergy; spiritual responses to the account are elicited via art and ceremonies; and moral/ethical edicts are built into the fabric of the narrative. A person adopting a traditional religion elects to believe in the mythos and its embedded interpretive, spiritual, and moral/ethical parameters and usually participates in a community of fellow believers.

## Who is a naturalist?

Scientific inquiry has provisioned us with a mind-boggling new core narrative—the epic of evolution, the epic of creation, the universe story, big history, everybody’s story—where humans and human cultures are understood to be emergent from and hence a part of Nature. Naturalists adopt this account as their core narrative, with full recognition that these understandings will certainly deepen and may shift with further scientific inquiry. They adopt the story currently on offer and do not simply select features of the story that support preferred theories of Nature.

## Who is a religious naturalist?

A religious naturalist is a naturalist who has adopted the Epic as a core narrative and goes on to explore its religious potential, developing interpretive, spiritual, and moral/ethical responses to the story. Importantly, these responses are not front-loaded into the story as they are in the traditions. Therefore, the religious naturalist engages in a process, both individually and in the company of fellow explorers, to discover and experience them. These explorations are informed and guided by the mindful understandings inherent in our human traditions, including art, literature, philosophy, and the religions of the world.

## What is meant by interpretive, spiritual, and moral?

The *interpretive* axis entails asking the Big Questions along philosophical/existential axes. How do our science-based

understandings inform our experience of being a Self? What do they tell us about free will? Death? Love? The search for The Meaning of Life? Why there is anything at all rather than nothing?

The *spiritual* axis entails exploring inward religious responses to the Epic, including awe and wonder, gratitude, assent, commitment, humility, reverence, joy, and the astonishment of being alive at all.

The *moral* axis entails outward communal responses to the Epic, where our deepening understandings of the animal/primate antecedents of social sensibilities offer important resources for developing social justice and human cooperation.

It also entails an orientation that can be called *ecomorality*, seeking right relations between the earth and its creatures, absorbing our interrelatedness, interdependence, and responsibilities.

### **What is religious naturalism?**

Religious naturalists seek to develop coherent and satisfying meta-versions of their interpretive, spiritual, and moral responses to the natural world. Some may go on to produce books, articles, blog postings, films, art, music and poetry that offer these syntheses for others to consider and learn from. A given synthesis can be called that person's version of Religious Naturalism.



The text of "Who is a Religious Naturalist?"  
is taken from the website of  
**The Religious Naturalist Association:**  
<http://religious-naturalist-association.org>

Mary Oliver's poems are to be found in *New & Selected Poems, Volumes 1 and 2* (Beacon Press). The majority of the responsive readings can be found in *Lifting Our Voices : Readings in the Living Tradition* (UUA, 2014). Other texts are to be found in various Unitarian sources.

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