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# JEFFERSON

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## Book Notes #109

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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence  
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### Poems of Optimism and Hope



‘Instructions for living a life.  
Pay attention.  
Be astonished.  
Tell about it.’

— *from Mary Oliver’s ‘Sometimes’* [1]

Am I the only one who has begun to find reading the news, trying to make sense of the endless strife of our political classes, “cold, and dark, and dreary”? I’m still looking for the sun behind the clouds, but in “The Rainy Day,” Henry Wadsworth Longfellow must have intuited 2022’s political idiocy when he wrote “Into each life some rain must fall,” for American politics, although it has its occasional

cloudburst, seems like nothing more than a chill March rain slowly but steadily soaking us in gloom.

from The Rainy Day

The day is cold, and dark, and dreary;  
It rains, and the wind is never weary ...

My life is cold, and dark, and dreary;  
It rains, and the wind is never weary ...

Be still, sad heart! And cease repining;  
Behind the clouds is the sun still shining;  
Thy fate is the common fate of all,  
Into each life some rain must fall,  
Some days must be dark and dreary. [2]

Originally, in this **Book Note** I had planned on sharing Part Eight of “The Seeds of Our Discontents” about mediated America. In preparing it, however, I had a vertiginous moment when it occurred to me that trying to understand the historical seeds of how we got to 2022 smacked more than a bit of chasing one’s tail as events spiraled forward and historical understanding came lagging after. Slogging forward, I tried to channel my inner William Ernest Henley, the Victorian poet who, upper lip stiffened, in “Invictus” proclaimed:

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate,  
I am the captain of my soul [3]

But, I confess, at least for this week, I said “Pshaw” (actually, I said something more forceful and not suitable for a JES publication) and decided I’d had enough trying to understand posturing populists like the fleet-footed Josh Hawley fleeing a mob he had moments earlier egged-on, and politicians calling a news conference to deny they called a news conference to deny that they were ever part of “Stop the Steal.”

No, the gloom they cast upon our common future, I admit, for the moment sapped my enthusiasm. We’ll return to sorting out “The Seeds of Our Discontents,” but for now I need, I decided, an infusion of optimism and hope.

Ah, hope, of which Emily Dickinson famously said:

“Hope is the thing with feathers –  
That perches in the soul –

And sings the tune without words –  
And never stops – at all ... [4]

A bit more grounded, a bit less ethereal, is Carl Sandburg's "Hope Is a Tattered Flag." Written in 1936, the depths of the Great Depression, Sandburg, open-eyed and resolutely realistic, refused to succumb to the shadows and found hope in the commonplace.

*from* Hope Is a Tattered Flag

Hope is a tattered flag and a dream of time.  
Hope is a heartspun word, the rainbow, the shadblow in white  
The evening star inviolable over the coal mines,  
The shimmer of northern lights across a bitter winter night,  
The blue hills beyond the smoke of the steel works,  
The birds who go on singing to their mates in peace, war, peace,  
The ten-cent crocus bulb blooming in a used-car salesroom,  
The horseshoe over the door, the luckpiece in the pocket,  
The kiss and the comforting laugh and resolve—  
Hope is an echo, hope ties itself yonder, yonder.  
The spring grass showing itself where least expected,  
The rolling fluff of white clouds on a changeable sky ... [5]

An interesting word, hope can seem flimsy – a kind of vague desiring. A verb, Merriam-Webster defines it as “to cherish a desire with anticipation: to want something to happen or be true; to desire with expectation of fulfillment.” A bit more strongly, it defines hope as “to expect with confidence.” [6] One who has “hope” is an optimist, a person who possesses optimism, which the Cambridge Dictionary defines as “the quality of being full of hope and emphasizing the good parts of a situation, or a belief that something good will happen.” [7]

As some of you know, for more than 40 years I occupied positions of leadership and for the past eight to 10 years have taught, lectured, and written on leadership. So far I have resisted the temptation to add to the 2.82 billion titles on leadership that a simple Google search discovers, but if I ever falter and add to that pile one of my leadership theory's two foundational characteristics is optimism. The other is vision, but optimism is key. An effective leader must convey a strong and positive vision of the future. Leaders must, in John Adams' memorable phrase, recognize “that there is no such thing as a problem; there is only an opportunity in disguise.”

What have the poets had to say about meeting the world with a spirit of optimism “recognizing opportunities in disguise”? To say Maya Angelou suffered a challenging childhood leaves chasms of understatement, yet she became

recognized, as Carol E. Neubauer said in ***Southern Women Writers: The New Generation***, “as a spokesperson for ... all people who are committed to raising the moral standards of living in the United States.” [8] In one of her most famous poems, “Still I Rise,” Angelou vividly evokes finding the opportunity inside the problem.

*from Still I Rise*

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?  
Why are you beset with gloom?  
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells  
Pumping in my living room ...

Out of the huts of history's shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
I rise  
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,  
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise. [9]

If a part of optimism is resilience – the ability, in Bob Dylan's phrase, “to keep on keeping on” – then whoever said it better (or briefer) than Langston Hughes?

Still Here

I been scared and battered.  
My hopes the wind done scattered.  
Snow has friz me,  
Sun has baked me,

Looks like between 'em they done  
Tried to make me  
Stop laughin', stop lovin', stop livin' –  
But I don't care!  
I'm still here! [10]

Of course most of us (many of us, some of us?) want more than simply *to be here*, although *being here now* is for almost all of us a constant challenge. We want not only to be here, but to be of use – to have something to do that is meaningful, something positive, something that takes us out of ourselves and puts us to work for the common good. And, in working for the common good, in a splendid reversal, we become more completely ourselves. For as Marge Piercy wrote:

*from To be of use*

The people I love the best  
jump into work head first  
without dallying in the shallows  
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.  
They seem to become natives of that element,  
the black sleek heads of seals  
bouncing like half-submerged balls ...

I want to be with people who submerge  
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest  
and work in a row and pass the bags along,  
who are not parlor generals and field deserters  
but move in a common rhythm  
when the food must come in or the fire be put out ... [11]

And while searching for that “something to do,” remember to be open to the possibilities, remember to be optimistic enough to take some chances, remember to be like Charles Bukowski in “The Laughing Heart”:

“your life is your life  
don't let it be clubbed into dank submission.  
be on the watch.  
there are ways out.  
there is a light somewhere.  
it may not be much light but  
it beats the darkness.  
be on the watch.  
the gods will offer you chances.  
know them.



anyone could tell you they would never last.  
Every morning she was asleep in my bed  
like a visitation, the gentleness in her  
like antelope standing in the dawn mist.  
Each afternoon I watched her coming back  
through the hot stony field after swimming,  
the sea light behind her and the huge sky  
on the other side of that.

How can they say  
the marriage failed?

... I believe Icarus was not failing as he fell,  
but just coming to the end of his triumph. [13]

There is a subtlety to Gilbert I always enjoy – how he says what he wants to say elliptically, metaphorically. Sometimes, however, you want to hear the poet just say it straight, as the great Irish poet Derek Mahon, channeling his inner Bob Marley, does in “Everything Is Going to Be All Right.” Mahon was one of the finest Irish poets of the late-20th century, often compared, if not in style, then in quality, to Seamus Heaney. Although he died in October 2020, the pandemic year, during that dreadful year Mahon’s poem became an Internet sensation giving housebound “quarantiners” a breath of hope.

#### Everything Is Going To Be All Right

How should I not be glad to contemplate  
the clouds clearing beyond the dormer window  
and a high tide reflected on the ceiling?  
There will be dying, there will be dying,  
but there is no need to go into that.  
The lines flow from the hand unbidden  
and the hidden source is the watchful heart.  
The sun rises in spite of everything  
and the far cities are beautiful and bright.  
I lie here in a riot of sunlight  
watching the day break and the clouds flying.  
Everything is going to be all right. [14]

I am hoping – and even optimistic – that this brief journey through poems of hope and optimism will have brightened for you the shadows of our time’s gloomy politics. But if not, then who better than Mary Oliver to remind us about what is important. If worrying, then realize that worrying will only leave you worried. If the events of the day have you down, then do as Oliver suggests – set them aside, get up and live.

## I Worried

I worried a lot. Will the garden grow, will the rivers  
flow in the right direction, will the earth turn  
as it was taught, and if not, how shall  
I correct it?

Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven,  
can I do better?

Will I ever be able to sing, even the sparrows  
can do it and I am, well,  
hopeless.

Is my eyesight fading or am I just imagining it,  
am I going to get rheumatism,  
lockjaw, dementia?

Finally I saw that worrying had come to nothing.  
And gave it up. And took my old body  
and went out into the morning,  
and sang. [15]



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"Optimism word cloud" at Utne available [here](#) accessed July 25, 2022.

### End Notes

1. Oliver, Mary. "Sometimes," in *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), p. 104-106.
2. Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth. "The Rainy Day" at **Maine Historical Society** available [here](#) accessed July 25, 2022.
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4. Dickinson, Emily. "Hope" is the thing with feathers..." in *Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems*, Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1961), pp. 34-35.
5. Sandburg, Carl. "Hope Is a Tattered Flag" at [Poem Hunter.com](#) available [here](#) accessed July 25, 2022.
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13. Gilbert, Jack. "Failing and Flying" in *Collected Poems*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), p. 228.
14. Mahon, Derek. "Everything Is Going to Be All Right" at [Poetry Book Society](#) available [here](#) accessed July 25, 2022.
15. Oliver, Mary. "I Worried" in *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*. (New York: Penguin, 2017), p. 59.

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