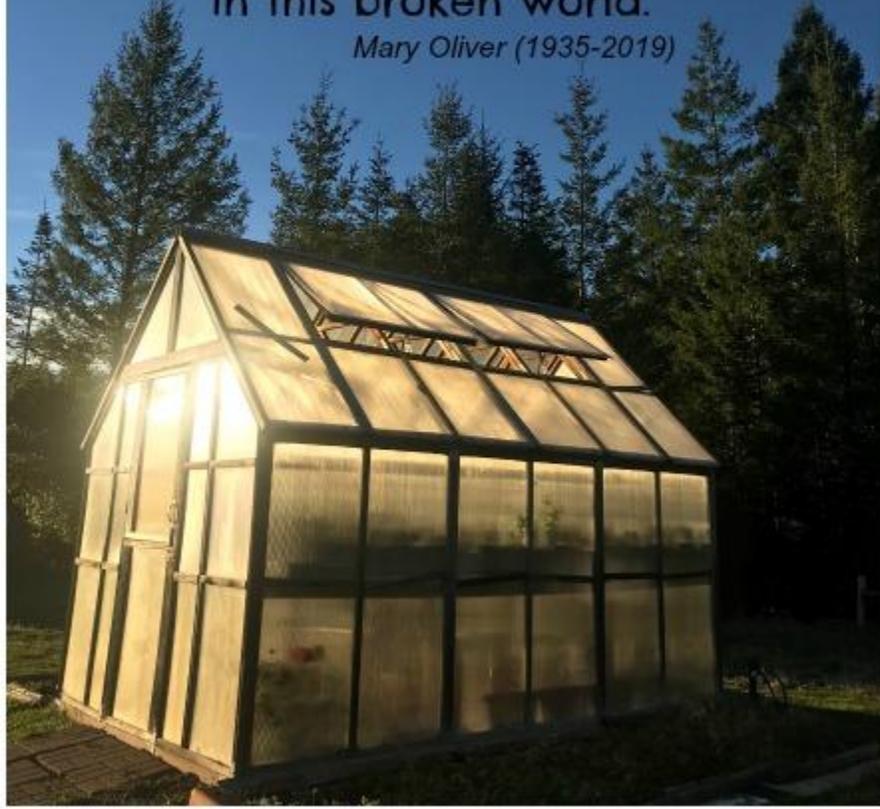


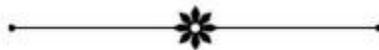
It is a serious thing
just to be alive
on this fresh morning
in this broken world.

Mary Oliver (1935-2019)



A WONDERFUL ORDINARY DAY

The upcoming weekend is filled with a number of minor and major events. And so it has been since prehistoric times because it is the center point between the Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox. There are quite a few sideshows and some really major events. First let's look at some of the many lesser, but nonetheless significant, activities.





The common name for February 2nd since the fourth century in the western world has been “Candlemas.” This was the day that the new candles to be used throughout the year in church and in the home had been prepared and were blessed and distributed. It was also seen as an appropriate time to celebrate the presentation in the Temple of Jesus when, according to tradition, the holy man Simeon announced he could now die in peace because, as he was promised, he had seen the salvation which God has prepared for all the nations to see.

Among a few very traditionalist minded Christians this is also the time when the “Churching of Women” ceremony takes place for mothers who have recently borne a child. I'm not going to go there! I am surrounded by women of a large spectrum of ages who would have no hesitancy in strongly objecting to this custom. If you absolutely must know about it go to *Leviticus 12:6*.

The blessing of the candles, as well as seeing Jesus as the light of the nations actually arose out of something more ancient. In ancient Rome a festival of lights was celebrated on February 1st. It was a springtime ritual of rebirth where people carried torches in a procession. This came from a myth explaining the origin of the four seasons of the year. It is a long story. I will just give you the essence. Cupid shot Pluto, lord of the underworld, with a love arrow. He fell in love with Proserpina and abducted her. In time she returned Pluto's love. Her mother Ceres, also known as “Earth Mother” and goddess of agriculture, was furious. She appealed to her brother Jove, who was also Proserpina's father, for justice. Jove said Proserpina could not be forced out of the underworld because the situation had been caused by love. Also Proserpina had eaten 7 pomegranate seeds — don't worry about this! However, Jove ruled that Proserpina would have to annually spend half the year above ground and half underground. Ceres and her followers took torches to find Proserpina underground. When they brought Proserpina above ground the earth burst forth with springtime! If you want to know more, like why Cupid shot Pluto, read Ovid's (43 BCE–17/18 CE) *Metamorphoses*.



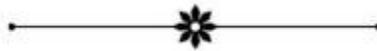
In some places this time of Candlemas is when all the Christmas decorations must be taken

down otherwise it is thought bad luck will follow. The greens are burned and their ashes are cast upon the fields where the crops are to be planted, giving the earth fresh power.

And last, but by no means least, we have the continually popular Groundhog Day on February 2nd. Nothing is more important to the farmer than the weather. What will this early spring weather be like? Should they plant or not? Going very far back the sense was that a clear sunny day was a very bad sign. An old rhyme goes,

*If Candlemas day be fair and clear,
there will be five winters in the year.*

So what the farmer prayed for was that Candlemas would be overcast and perhaps even miserable.



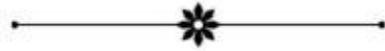
The major event of this midpoint between the Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox is that farming is beginning. For religious people this is a wonderful space between the festivities of Christmas and what is coming later at Easter. In church calendars this is known as “Ordinary Time”. For Thomas Merton (1915–1968), probably America's most famous monk, Ordinary Time was the most glorious time of year! There is just life.

Even here at Starcross the farming has begun, much of it in the greenhouses where little sprouts are becoming ready to plant. In the orchards and the olive groves the trees have begun to awaken.

Around me the camellia and the daffodils are blooming. Buds are swelling on the trees. Tiny yellow flowers appear on what had simply been assumed to be weeds. As I've written before, it is a time when it's easy to ask yourself “What is my life all about?”

In the nearby fields and vineyards men and women are in a creative partnership with the earth. Even with the sound of an occasional tractor there is a special silence that has come across the earth and the people who stand on it. For centuries, in one way or another

people have stood here where I stand and marveled at the wonderful beauty of an ordinary day.



One of the First People on this earth where I am standing may well have had this prayer in her or his heart. The source is unknown but it fits the day,

*O Great Spirit of our Ancestors,
I raise my pipe to you.
To your messengers the four winds,
and to Mother Earth,
who provides for your children.
Give us the wisdom to teach our children
to love, to respect, and to be kind to each
other so that they may grow
with peace in mind.
Let us learn to share all good things that
you provide for us on this Earth.*

Brother Toby