

So let us go on, cheerfully enough,  
this and every crisping day.

*Mary Oliver (1935-2019)*



## LITTLE MOMENTS THAT MATTER

We have had beautiful spring weather but today as I am writing, the weather turned to a hard rain. That is very uncommon at this time of year. My cat Tigger has always held the opinion that rain is a ridiculous notion controlled by the humans he lives with. He makes it very clear that he wants us to turn it off!

Quite frequently these days I feel as if the environment and the culture that I have lived in for the past 88.5 years is crumbling. Somewhat like Tigger, I look around to find someone responsible for this mess. But at some level I know that really isn't going to help.

I was born in a Mississippi county named after the Confederate general Nathan

Bedford Forrest (1821–1877). He was brilliant and he was savage. When several hundred African–American Union troops surrendered to him, he had them slaughtered. Forrest was also the founder of the Ku Klux Klan. Murdering African Americans in order to preserve the “Southern way of life” was still present when I first saw the light of day. However, in fairness it should be said that the courageous African Americans of Forrest County made it a bright spot in the voter registration campaigns of the 1960s. But my family had long moved away by then.

During the 1920s and 30s mill owners in southern Mississippi clear–cut the beautiful yellow pine forests that once covered that area. When my parents



saw the forests disappearing, we moved West where there was more equality and more trees. At Starcross I have long lived among people who have a deep passion for both racial equality and protecting the environment, so we have a conservation easement and replant trees. But even more importantly, we love the trees.

It seems, perhaps, that I have come full circle in a journey I do not completely understand. Yesterday when the weather was good, I decided I would like to stroll upon this land that has been my home for half a century. Our Sister Marti once said it was the only place I really felt at home. I've come to believe she was right. And I think journeying back to our roots in some fashion, is a trip everyone ought to make from time to time. To put it in more inspiring language, I will borrow from T.S. Eliot (1988–1965),

*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.*



The hillside where we planted our first olive trees has always seemed an historical place to me. Occasionally finding rocks with maritime fossils helps us understand that this was once under water and the hills around us were at one time the coastline. The ocean is about 8 miles west of us now but years ago a visitor told us there was actually a rather large bay here. We know that many years later the sunny hillside was a place where indigenous people dried fish and exchanged goods. We found quite a few arrowheads here. A Pomo neighbor told us about a legend that there were mean people who lived here in prehistoric times. Sensing that we were a bit distressed at this news she quickly said, "Don't worry about it. They all moved to Washington!"



I have strong memories of years ago when our children were planting little Italian olive seedlings. Both the children and the trees have grown into beautiful and productive inhabitants of this planet. The harvest times stand out in my memory as well. People come here to help with the harvest from many different places and are facing many different challenges in life. The olive groves are places of healing. Perhaps their roots go back into the soil that was once washed by the healing ocean waves.



The fruit orchard is a very special place for me. Here are fruit trees that came from seedlings planted in the first years of the 20th century. There are also trees that others have planted including myself. When I point to a tree and say, "I planted that tree!" young friends look at me with that "so what's the big deal?" expression. Well, they will find out how important this is when they

reach 88.5!

Our friend Paul Monette (1945–1995), the award-winning author and AIDS activist was once having lunch with us in the orchard. One of the children brought him an apple. Paul looked at it a long time as if remembering his own childhood in New England and then he said, *“There is nothing more important than eating an apple from a tree a friend has planted.”*



Our little chapel sits on the high point of our property. Behind it is 50 acres of land that is forever wild. Sister Julie and others have made it very clear that I am never to go into the forest alone. A rather large number of friends also



point out that having a fall is one of the worst things that could happen to me. Somewhat uncharacteristically, I follow their instructions. However I can stand on the deck of the chapel and look back on that land. So many things are happening there.

Our conservation partners and friends have pointed out that we should always leave things as they are. If an ancient tree falls over in the wind, let it stay there. Its story is not finished. Multiple ecologies will develop in and around the log. In a world where at least one specie becomes extinct each day, it is very important not to interfere with any form of existence.

After the fires north of us last year, we have had many more birds than usual, flying and singing over all of our land. I love this symphony coming from the woods. The ravens with their loud caws. Woodpeckers pecking around tree trunks while providing the percussion rhythm. Songbirds singing just because they are alive. I discover a fawn doing the same thing I am doing. Just being

still and listening — somehow knowing that something sacred is going on.



Looking up at the cloudy sky, I feel a few light raindrops on my face. It seems time to head back to the house and join my disgruntled cat.

Walking down the hill I see a young boy coming up the hill following a troop of frantic quail. We both pause to relish this moment and watch the adult quails in their panicky quest to find shelter from the troubling weather they know is coming.



There is a 78 year gap between myself and the boy on the other side of the quail. We come from very different backgrounds but we are both smiling at the scurrying quail.

There is a lot of cruelty in this world. What our government is doing to the people at our borders who only want a safe place to be, will regrettably hasten the destruction of what we are all seeking. What many of us have done in our quest for greed and privilege is leading to the destruction of this beautiful planet. These are the realities against which we must rally and resist as best we can.

But for now, there is only a 10-year-old boy and 88.5 year old man standing on the same path and enjoying the antics of a flock of quail. These moments are also important.

***Brother Toby***

*Quail photo courtesy of Monica Schwalbenberg-Pena*