

The Word of the Year

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Poet Mary Oliver died this week.

She gave the Ware Lecture at General Assembly several years ago. Three of her poems, or parts of them, appear as readings in our hymnal (including this morning's opening words). Ms. Oliver wrote today's meditation, too. Friends and colleagues, Unitarian Universalist and not, filled Facebook with her poems in the days following her death. Her death feels too significant to let pass without mention. Indeed, it was tempting, oh so tempting, to fill this entire hour with her words.

Yet to do so would fail to do justice to the sermon title I announced. Fail to do justice to the memory of the man whose birthday we celebrate this weekend. Fail even to do justice to the poet herself. There will be time enough to more fully celebrate her gift for words and her keen eye for the ways the holy inhabits our world.

Today, the word of the year for 2018. And what a word it is! *Justice*.

Justice because, according to Merriam-Webster.com

- It was a top lookup throughout the year ... with the entry being consulted 74% more than in 2017.
- The concept of justice was at the center of many of our national debates in the past year: racial justice, social justice, criminal justice, economic justice. In any conversation about these topics, the question of just what exactly we mean when we use the term justice is relevant, and part of the discussion.
- This year's news had many stories involving the division within the executive branch of government responsible for the enforcement of laws: the Department of Justice, sometimes referred to simply as "Justice." Of course, the Mueller investigation itself is constantly in the news, and is being carried out through the Justice Department. Another big news story included yet another meaning of the word *justice*, as a synonym

or title for “judge,” used frequently during the Kavanaugh confirmation hearings for the Supreme Court.

- Justice has varied meanings that do a lot of work in the language—meanings that range from the technical and legal to the lofty and philosophical. For many reasons and for many meanings, one thing’s for sure: *justice* has been on the minds of many people in 2018.

When I think about justice without regard to any specific larger context, as in simply “*justice* was the word of the year for 2018,” two things come to mind. I think about Micah 6:8. And I think about poor old Officer Obie in *Alice’s Restaurant*.

We walked in, sat down, Obie came in with the twenty seven eight-by-ten colour glossy pictures with circles and arrows and a paragraph on the back of each one, sat down. Man came in said, "All rise." We all stood up, and Obie stood up with the twenty seven eight-by-ten colour glossy pictures, and the judge walked in sat down with a seeing eye dog, and he sat down, we sat down. Obie looked at the seeing eye dog, and then at the twenty seven eight-by-ten colour glossy pictures with circles and arrows and a paragraph on the back of each one, and looked at the seeing eye dog. And then at twenty seven eight-by-ten colour glossy pictures with circles and arrows and a paragraph on the back of each one and began to cry, 'cause Obie came to the realization that it was a typical case of American blind justice, and there wasn't nothing he could do about it, and the judge wasn't going to look at the twenty seven eight-by-ten colour glossy pictures with the circles and arrows and a paragraph on the back of each one explaining what each one was to be used as evidence against us.

Contemporary society generally understands the blindfold that covers Lady Justice’s eyes in many, though not all, images of her as signifying the impartiality of the justice system. When weighing evidence (the scales she holds in one hand) and rendering judgment and punishment (the sword held in her other hand), Lady Justice is not biased by matters of class or position or power or wealth. Officer Obie’s dismay at “a typical case of American blind justice” is funny because we believe in blind justice. That is, we believe in the ideal. We believe justice should be blind. We believe that the Officer Obies of the world, with their *eight-by-ten colour glossy pictures with the circles and arrows and a paragraph on the back of each one explaining what each one was*, with their overblown sense of their own power and authority, with their grudges and their absolute

conviction in their own rightness, we believe the Officer Obies of the world need the tempering influence of an impartial justice system. What we **don't** necessarily believe in, anymore, is the actual impartiality of our justice system. And in our growing disbelief we hark back to the 16th century when the blindfold first began appearing on Lady Justice to signify not impartiality but rather tolerance of abuse or ignorance of certain aspects of the law.

That *justice* was among the most looked up words in 2018 isn't all that difficult to understand. As the entry from [Merriam-Webster.com](https://www.merriam-webster.com) points out, there was, at the end of the year, the nomination and confirmation of Judge Kavanaugh to the U. S. Supreme Court; if nothing else, folks were probably busy looking up the difference between Judge So and So and Justice So and So. And there was, as Merriam Webster also points out, the ongoing drama surrounding the Department of Justice—the Mueller investigation, continuing fallout from Attorney General Sessions' recusal, firings and hirings, interviews and books, and pundits all discussing what's going on over there at Justice (shorthand for the Justice Department). And even if none of that had been making headlines in 2018, even without any of that capital J Justice stuff, *justice* would still have been foremost in the minds of millions of American.

The brokenness of our justice system at just about every level and in every jurisdiction. Backlogs of cases. Shortages of public defenders. Fees in many jurisdictions for defendants to apply for the services of a 'free' public defender. Shortages of immigration judges. Questions of who is owed justice under our Constitution and to whom it is actually afforded. Misuses and abuses and miscarriages of justice. In almost every day's headlines we can see Officer Obie clutching his *eight-by-ten colour glossy pictures with the circles and arrows and a paragraph on the back of each one explaining what each one was*. And sometimes the judge walks in with their seeing--eye dog, representing impartial justice in the best sense of the word. But too often the judge walks in ready to see and believe anything Officer Obie has to offer.

There's little question why *justice* was the word of the year, according to at least one dictionary (Oxford Living Dictionaries chose *toxic* as 2018's word of the year but that's a sermon for another day). The question is, how, if at all, we are called to respond to the fact that *justice* is a concept, an ideal, of such pressing concern? Will twelve months pass and another word rise to the top of lists purporting to signal what's uppermost in our

conscience, while the word justice disappears from those same lists, but not because any of the reasons it made the list in the first place have disappeared or been resolved or even addressed in any meaningful way?

I first came to meditate on Micah 6:8 during my years in divinity school. *What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness/mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?* hung at the front of the sanctuary of one of the Unitarian Universalist churches where I sometimes worshiped. I'd read those words and reflect on the difference between Midwestern and New England UU churches. I'd read those words and wonder if that congregation were to renovate its sanctuary then, in the last decade of the twentieth century, if it would keep Micah front and center. I'd read those words and try to discern what it might mean for me to do justice, to love mercy/kindness, and to walk humbly with my God.

Today I read those words, and the verses preceding them, the ones in which the clueless people are mocked for asking if the Lord wants extravagant or bloody sacrifice—I read those words and I'm struck by the personal, singular nature of them. The prophet doesn't say, "What is required of you is an impartial justice system. What is required of you is to set up a three part government with checks and balances between the parts." No, what is required of you, o mortal, is that you do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.

I haven't yet discerned, how, specifically, practically, consistently, I'm called to do justice, love kindness (the part that sounds deceptively easily), or walk humbly with the Holy. But I know this: figuring it out is my lifelong task.

Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.

The bumper sticker a couple decades back put it this way: *think globally, act locally*. Anthropologist Margaret Mead put it this way: *never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has*. Universalist John Murray is said to have said, *You may possess a small light... uncover it, let it shine*. Murray or those who attributed those words to him may have been consciously or unconsciously echoing the Buddha who put it this way, *Make of yourself a light*. Martin Luther King, Jr. said it a hundred different ways, including, *"More and more I feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively*

than have the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.” Even Mary Oliver said it:

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.

I'm never going to sit on the Supreme Court of the United States or the bench of any other court in the land. Neither are you, probably. But doing justice is as much—no, more in our hands than it is in the hands of those nine men and women and all the other judges and magistrates and justices of the peace. We the people are the justice system. Countless are the ways we might be a light or let our light shine, act locally alongside a small group of thoughtful, committed co-citizens, begin using time effectively or be ignited. Countless and not particularly new or radical or fancy:

- Writing letters to editors
- Rallying
- Marching
- Reading challenging articles and books
- Listening to the voices of people on the margins
- Voting
- Voting again
- Aligning our spending with our values
- Entertaining the notion that our experience might not be universal

· Feeding and sheltering those who fall through the cracks and then patching up the cracks—or building a whole new structure.

My heart ached a little more each time I walked into another library this week and read the signs: “the library will be closed on January 21 in honor of Martin Luther King Day.” I understand that governmental entities close on state and federal holidays. Still (and this thought is hardly originally or uniquely mine), I wonder if the best way to honor Dr. King’s life and legacy is to shut down places of learning and exploration, such schools and library, places where we might equip ourselves and our children for justice-making. But I come back again to my conviction that we—not our governments or agencies or institutions—are the ones called to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with the Holy. And our governments and agencies and institutions will only ever be as just and as merciful and as humble as we the people who compromise them, as we the people commit ourselves to being. And 2019’s the word of year is going to be a word we the people choose. Let’s make it *mercy* or *kindness* or even *humility* as a flawed people striving to be holy.

Amen