



## The Central Commitment Of The Creative Life, by Mary Oliver

Intellectual work sometimes, spiritual work certainly, artistic work always -- these are forces that fall within its grasp, forces that must travel beyond the realm of the hour and the restraint of the habit. Nor can the actual work be well separated from the entire life. Like the knights of the Middle Ages, there is little the creatively inclined person can do but to prepare himself, body and spirit, for the labor to come -- for his adventures are all unknown. In truth, the work itself is the adventure. And no artist could go about this work, or would want to, with less than extraordinary energy and concentration. The extraordinary is what art is about.

No one yet has made a list of places where the extraordinary may happen and where it may not. Still, there are indications. Among crowds, in drawing rooms, among easements and comforts and pleasures, it is seldom seen. It likes the out-of-doors. It likes the concentrating mind. It likes solitude. It is more likely to stick to the risk-taker than the ticket-taker. It isn't that it would disparage comforts, or the set routines of the world, but that its concern is directed to another place. Its concern is the edge, and the making of a form out of the formlessness that is beyond the edge.

Of this there can be no question -- a creative work requires a loyalty as complete as the loyalty of water to the force of gravity. A person trudging through the wilderness of creation who does not know this -- who does not swallow this -- is lost. He who does not crave that roofless place eternity should stay at home. Such a person is perfectly worthy, and useful, and even beautiful, but is not an artist. Such a person had better live with timely ambitions and finished work formed for the sparkle of the moment only.

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It is six A.M., and I am working. I am absentminded, reckless, heedless of social obligations, etc. It is as it must be. The tire goes flat, the tooth falls out, there will be a hundred meals without mustard. The poem gets written. I have wrestled with the angel and I am stained with light and I have no shame. Neither do I have guilt. My responsibility is not to the ordinary, or the timely. It does not include mustard, or teeth. It does not extend to the lost button, or the beans in the pot. My loyalty is to the inner vision, whenever and howsoever it may arrive. If I have a meeting with you at three o'clock, rejoice if I am late. Rejoice even more if I do not arrive at all.

There is no other way work of artistic worth can be done. And the occasional success, to the striver, is worth everything. The most regretful people on earth are those who felt the call to creative work, who felt their own creative power restive and uprising, and gave to it neither power nor time.

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