

"One Wild and Precious Life"  
A Reflection for Flower Communion  
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One hundred million years ago something happened that totally changed the face of the earth.

One hundred million years is actually not so long ago in the total evolution of life on earth. Scientists will tell us that life is thought to have begun about 3½ BILLION years ago. So 100 million years ago is pretty recently. But then again, we human beings are the real newcomers around here, having emerged as a species only about 200,000 to 300,000 years ago.

It's hard to get our minds inside evolutionary time. I can hardly remember what happened last week, or even yesterday. In our way of living, we want everything right away. We want results quickly. But when we talk about the development of different kinds of life forms on this planet, we have to understand that the beautiful and amazing living things that surround us came into being very, very slowly. These teeming life forms (of which human beings are but one) came into being through numberless generations over countless millennia of interacting with each other. Nothing came into being by itself. Everything that exists, exists from its relationships, and has no existence apart from these relationships.

So, as I was saying, about 100 million years ago something happened that changed the face of the planet: The flowers began to appear!

Before that time, there had been green trees and ferns and mosses and mushrooms—but no flowers. For a hundred million years before the invention of flowers, many insects had gained the power of flight and had been buzzing around in the air, landing on the plants and randomly helping the trees and plants to create new baby plants by spreading their pollen and spores around.

But somewhere along the way, the plants figured out that they could turn the busy flight of insects to their own advantage. They began to develop special brightly colored leaves around their organs of reproduction (their pollen sepals and their stamens). These brightly colored leaves (which we call petals) began to take on more and more amazing shapes and eye-popping colors so that the insects would notice them as they were flying around. And they began to emit seductive, heady perfumes that would make themselves irresistible to the butterflies and bees and beetles that were zooming about. The primeval forests and jungles slowly exploded with color and scent.

Over time, some flowers and some insects began to grow to look like one another. The Bee Orchid looks so much like a particular kind of female bee that when the male bee flies by, he spots what he thinks is the female bee and he zooms over and embraces her, and so he helps the orchid to receive the pollen from another bee orchid somewhere else in the forest.

On the cover of the leaflet is an image of a bee reading a poem to a Bee Balm flower. I loved the suggestion of the bee being in love with the flower, whose scent it cannot resist, and reading to it a sonnet that it had composed to express its appreciation for the flower. The poem might sound something like this: bzzz ZZZZ zzz zz zz BZZZZzzzzzz.

Over time, some insects began to take on the shapes and colors of flowers that they frequented, so that when they hid among the flowers, they would not be noticed by the other critters in the forest that might want to eat them. And so the plants helped the insects, and the insects helped the plants.

Some plants would take years and years and years to produce only one brief period of blooming, but when they bloomed, their flowers were so extraordinary and the perfume that they emitted was so intense that for that short period of time that plant would upstage everything and be the center of everyone's attention. All the insects and pollen-sipping birds would come to visit it.

Let's hope it was worth it, because after the plant had bloomed that one time, it would begin to die. So its whole long life had only one purpose, to create for a few fleeting moments those extraordinary blossoms.

Some of the insects that came to visit those extraordinary blossoms that day would be alive and flying around just as briefly—just for a day or so—before they mated and died. The flowers and the insects had shared their one wild and precious life, passing on their gifts to the next generation, before fading into the ground of all life and death.

Over millions of years and innumerable generations, the insects and the flowers grew and developed through the communion of relationships with each other. They developed through an existence of total inter-being. Each helped the other to flourish. And so it is with all life—all living things and all the elemental foundations of life woven together in a tapestry of inter-being.

This spring I have been noticing the peonies. You wait with such anticipation as the peony buds begin to form and swell bigger and bigger until they are like huge gumballs, and then they explode into fragrance and into those silky ruffles of pink and white and yellow like a ballerina's tutu. The black ants find them irresistible and crawl around among the lacy petals. Human beings don't like the ants on the peonies, but I suspect that they have grown together in such a way that they are each served by the other. And then, in a day or two, after all that breathless waiting, the peony blossoms begin to fade. In another day the petals drop and they are gone. One wild and precious life.

This phrase comes from a poem by Mary Oliver: "The Summer Day"  
She asks:

Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean—  
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?

Our flower communion ritual has many meanings, but one of its purposes is to help us with the act of prayer which Mary Oliver calls "paying attention."

Each of the blossoms that have been brought today is a window into the mystery and wonder of the interdependent life on earth. Each blossom is a fleeting beauty, yet each flower whispers of the ways in which life endures through time—by spilling itself out in a display of eccentric color and creativity, by sharing itself, allowing others to find in it food, shelter, a place to rest, an experience of delight. By passing on its gifts and purpose to the next generation.

And the flower communion helps us with our prayer of paying attention because it reminds us of how we are like flowers. Each person is different, each glorious, each changing at every moment, all of us giving ourselves to one another and to life in a network of inter-being.

As we give and receive these flowers in communion, as we pray the prayer of paying attention, we remember the gifts that each individual brings to the community of inter-being. We contemplate the purposes to which we are each called in our one wild and precious life.