"Making a Difference"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
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Making a Difference—through Culture

"What will you do with this one wild and precious life?" Mary Oliver used her life to notice the natural world and then to tell us, her readers, what she saw. She saw herons and grasshoppers, light and shadow. She noticed the wonder of new life and the too often vicious reality of death. Her obituary described her poetry as both" shallow and profound, uplifting and elegiac," suggesting that her verse might be best read as "poetic portmanteau, one that binds up both the primal joy and the primal melancholy of being alive." Never shrinking from the observation that life is comprise of both joy and sorrow, her poetry presented it all to us, asking us if we too are paying attention. Do we notice the small details of life? Are we attending to the depth of meaning in watching the drama of life and death in our backyard landscape? Through her poetry, Oliver challenges us to be aware of our living and of our dying.

With more than twenty volumes of verse, Mary Oliver was a best-selling poet who continues to be widely known and quoted. Through her writing, she made a difference in her world. So also did poet and playwright Ntozake Shange [en-toh-ZAH-kee SHAHN-gay]. You may not have heard of Shange—she was not as widely published as Oliver. While Shange was also a prolific writer, she is best known for a play she wrote when just 27: "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf." Begun off-Broadway in 1975, its critical reception enabled a move to Broadway. In 1982, American Playhouse on PBS staged the play and in 2010 Tyler Perry made a big-screen version. Described as "a series of searing feminist monologues for seven black female characters named for the colors of the rainbow," her play tells the stories of black women, inspiring generations of playwrights while using a tool of culture to make a difference in her world.

With a far greater commercial success on stage, playwright Neil Simon also died this year. A comic writer from a young age, Simon started writing for Sid Ceaser before penning his early work, "The Odd Couple" and "Barefoot in the Park." With his later trilogy "Brighton Beach Memoirs, Biloxi Blues, and Broadway Bound" as well as "Lost in Younkers," his work revealed more about his own life growing up Jewish and struggling in New York. His plays enjoyed a tremendous audience. His obituary states: "From 1965 to 1980, his plays and musicals racked up more than 9,000 performances, a record not even remotely touched by any other playwright of the era. In 1966 alone, he had four Broadway shows running simultaneously." Often comic, his plays also depicted an understanding of life that demonstrated vulnerability and heartache. As a playwright, he too left an impact on culture.

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Another great comic great who died this year was Tim Conway. Never very successful as a leading name, he was an extraordinary collaborator. Long-time comic co-star Carol Burnett said of Conway, "His sketches with Harvey Korman deserve a spot in whatever cultural time capsule we're setting aside for future generations,'' she wrote. "Maybe there are other performers as funny, but in my opinion I can't think of anybody funnier.''

And, if we're talking about people having an impact on culture, we must also remember Marvel comic writer and editor, Stan Lee. For anyone paying attention to movie franchises lately, you couldn't miss the ongoing success of Marvel. From the Hulk and Thor, to the many versions of Spiderman, to the racial barriers broken by Black Panther, the characters created by Stan Lee on the printed pages of comic books continue to live on. In his lifetime, Lee was criticized for not giving credit to those who worked with him as artists and writers—including early Spiderman artist Steve Ditko who also died this year. Unfortunately, we repeated this mistake and only honored Lee in the Order of Service for our next song. As the choir sings the Spiderman theme song, may we think of Lee *and* Ditko as well as all those whose pens and creativity have made a difference through culture.

Making a Difference—through Government

This year saw the death of a number of prominent government leaders. Last summer, former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, died at the age of 80. Like many government leaders, the record of his impact is mixed. Recipient of the 2001 Peace Prize, the UN also saw significant abuse of the Iraq "oil for food" program under his watch. Even so, Annan was strongly committed to the UN mission of joint action—even calling George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq "illegal" for acting without full UN support.

Former President George H.W. Bush, who died in November at 94, would also come to express some concern about his son's administration . . . even as his own presidency included the first invasion of Iraq which arguably opened the door to the ongoing US engagement in the region. As president, Bush Sr. diplomatically steered the US response to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Although Bush would lose after one term to Bill Clinton, he and Clinton would later become close through efforts to fundraise in support of the 2004 tsunami in Asia and Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Barbara, his beloved wife of 73 years, suggested Bush Sr. may have been the father Clinton never had.

And, of course, this last year also saw the death of John McCain at age 81. While serving three decades as the Senator from Arizona, he earned the nickname of "Maverick" for going his own way . . . a nickname some would say was no longer merited as his presidential campaigns framed him as a more conservative and traditional candidate. Certainly, in his last year, his very public critiques of President Trump and the Republican Congress

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suggested a bit of the Maverick strain of independence. Two days after his diagnosis of brain cancer was made public, McCain arrived with a fresh scar above his eye to vote against the Republican effort to undo the Affordable Care Act. To the bewilderment of many, the Republican leader became a bit of a hero to many Democrats.

While it's very clear that government leaders can made a big impact on our world, its less clear that we can entirely identify (most) politicians as categorically one thing or the other. A final example is Representative John Dingell who died at age 92 in February. The longest serving member of Congress in American history, Dingell was a Democratic representative from Michigan for 59 years—a seat previously held by his father and now held by his wife. Seen as one of the last "Bulls" of Congress with a tremendous reservoir of power, former Michigan Senator Carl Levin said of Dingell:

> "John fought to pass Medicare —and he won. He fought to pass Medicaid—and he won. He fought for civil rights—and he won. He fought for the Endangered Species Act and the Clean Air Act—and he won."

Representative for the area of Detroit, he promoted the interests of the auto-industry. An avid hunter like many of his constituents, he received an A+ rating from the NRA. And, to the frustration of many Democrats, he mostly voted anti-abortion.

At Dingell's funeral, the front pew was the bipartisan leadership of the House: Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, and Majority Leader Steny Hoyer. Amidst the divisions of government, perhaps we can still have moments of shared mourning and respectful memory. In considering our government leaders, perhaps we can consider how they too are complex people with stories, commitments, and motivations that might resist a single categorization.

Making a Difference—in Your Own Way

Sometimes people make a difference not by getting their name in Broadway lights or on the ballot, but by simply living out their own convictions in a given place and time.

For example, in January, Dr. Bernice Sandler died at the age of 90. Known as the godmother of Title IX, she had earned a bachelors, master, and doctorate by the late 1960's but repeatedly found her professional opportunities curtailed by her gender. When she found mention of an executive order prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex in government contracts, she worked with others to bring administrative charges to the Bureau of Labor. Then, confronted with statistics and facts of sex discrimination mined by Dr. Sandler,

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Congress took up the issue and passed the Title IX legislation in 1972. What began as a tool for equity in admissions to schools and academic programs that receive federal funding, also became a path for gender equity in sports and then a way to require schools to protect women from sexual assault and harassment. "Title IX turned out to be the legislative equivalent of a Swiss Army knife," Marty Langelan, an expert in sexual harassment and longtime friend of Dr. Sandler's, told the New York Times.

While Dr. Sandler fought against sex discrimination from a place of personal experience, Dr. Richard Green was a heterosexual man who fought to change the American Psychiatric Association's classification of homosexuality as a mental disorder. In 1972, he wrote in the International Journal of Psychiatry questioning "the premise that homosexuality is a disease or a homosexual is inferior.'' The next year homosexuality was dropped as a disorder from the American Psychiatric Association diagnostic manual. Green died in April at the age of 82. At his memorial service, his son said of his father: "He had no interest in conforming. Beyond those he loved, I genuinely don't think he cared what people thought or said about him. Most of the time, I think he loved that they were saying anything about him at all. He had exactly no interest in social norms.''

This year saw the loss of other trailblazers as well. Last September, ballet dancer Arthur Mitchell died at 84. In the 1950's, African American Mitchell broke barriers with the New York City Ballet. Months before his death, Mitchell reflected on his 1957 pairing with a white, female lead, saying, "Can you imagine the audacity to take an African-American and Diana Adams, the essence and purity of Caucasian dance, and to put them together on the stage?" When the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968, Mitchell began his own school which came to include the Dance Theatre of Harlem. In a post on Instagram after his death, Misty Copeland, the first African-American female principal dancer with the American Ballet Theatre, wrote, "You gave me so much, through our conversations, your dancing and by simply existing as a brown body in ballet. But you were so much more than a brown body. You're an icon and hero."

Who is your hero? There are so many different ways to be a hero and to make a difference. There was also Fleming Begraye who died this year at 97. One of 400 Navajo code breakers in World War II, he was part of team credited with winning the Pacific War. And yet, the very existence of the team was not fully declassified until 1968. How do we celebrate the heroes whose names we do not even know?

Of course, other names are known more widely—such as legendary Celtic John Havelick who died at 79 in April. Over two decades and two Championship eras, Havelick hustled

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across the court. The moment Havelick stole the ball to save the Celtics lead in game 7 of the 1965 Eastern Conference playoffs has become a staple of Celtic highlight reels.

A name you may not know is Tod Bol. But, I bet you have seen his impact. He founded the "Little Free Library"—the little outdoor boxes of miniature libraries. According to his obituary: "There is a network of more than 75,000 tiny, whimsical book exchanges that encourage passersby to "take a book, leave a book," There are now Little Free Libraries in all 50 states and in 88 countries, including Australia, Brazil, Ghana, Japan and the Netherlands. They stand inside Los Angeles police stations and at New York City subway stops, at prisons in Wisconsin and hospitals in Ireland, at a refugee camp in Uganda and a schoolyard in South Sudan." With a simple idea, he became a global hero.

In my own hometown of Grand Rapids, Michigan, Richard Devos, co-founder of Amway, is a hero who died this year. Yes, he earned his fortune in an international multi-level marketing company. Yes, he has used his fortune to fund many conservative causes, candidates, and institutions. And, yes, he is the father-in-law of Education Secretary Betsy Devos with whom you may disagree. AND, the Devos family and their Amway co-founders, the VanAndels, have been leaders is funded the revitalization of the city. From a sports arena to hospitals to universities with downtown campuses, the change would not have been possible without the Amway money.

Life is complicated. Stories of a life are rarely a single note. Maybe this too is what Oliver was trying to teach us in her poems—there is a tangle that cannot be neatly pulled apart. The choices we make about what we do with our one life may not be simple, but they will be ours. When you reach the end of your life, how will you have made a difference?

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