

## **The World as I Find It**

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Moving to the Inland Empire from Upstate New York has presented many challenges for me, some more welcome than others. I am fascinated by Southern California's landscapes, desert, mountain, and coast; the brilliant color of Lupine and Poppies, its more cultivated areas of farmlands, botanical gardens, and citrus groves.

As much as I delight in these aspects of Southern California, I am at the same time sobered, saddened, even horrified to see the other side, the subcultures that have failed to assimilate and instead subsist in barrios, bicycling to work each day to make less than minimum wage, the dozen or so day laborers who wait patiently on sidewalks outside of Home Depot, the children who are not attended to, the dogs who run homeless in the streets and those needlessly killed on freeways, the teenaged boy found guilty for the murder of his 17-year-old friend, whose charred remains were found in his backyard.

I wonder how those who care can hold onto hope with such dismal prospects, as I see mothers trudging hot pavement with shoeless children, one newly divorced mother, who, in a single, thoughtless moment, tries to beat a train and loses, throwing her child off the tracks at the last minute . . . .

Do we simply shrug our shoulders? Blame it on her tattoos, her possible drug use? Feel relieved that we were in a better pool of survival?

This way of dealing with tragedy may be preferable to that of obsessing over each new tragedy we see. Complacency can be a good shield.

But how is one to respond to Southern California's devastation in the midst of seeking its beauty? How do we make sense of the stark lines of difference between rich and poor? What choices are at our disposal? How are we, as Christians, supposed to deal with it all?

My escapist attitude compels me to close my eyes and pretend that somehow the problems in the Inland Empire disappear once I cannot see them anymore. I long to think only of the beautiful; to find the fastest wormhole to a perfect world. I confess at times, either mentally or physically, I want to leave the battlefield and go AWOL.

But then I look out my window and see the sweeper. . . . about 5 feet tall with dark hair and eyes, wearing a knee-length floral housedress. Starting religiously at 5 o'clock each morning, she sweeps the curb, moving up the street on one side and down on the other. I have seen her sweep

through an entire morning. When she sees me, she smiles and waves. She seems to love this simple act of cleaning up her world. Doing what she can to give back beauty . . . to love *her* world.

Might we find our best response to this world in the simplest measures?

A poem by Mary Oliver offers a similar response to the dialectic between beauty and devastation. It is called "Messenger."

My work is loving the world.  
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird—  
equal seekers of sweetness.  
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.  
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?  
Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect? Let me  
keep my mind on what matters,  
which is my work,

which is mostly standing still and learning to be  
astonished.  
The phoebe, the delphinium.  
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.  
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all the ingredients are here,

which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart  
and these body-clothes,  
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy  
to the moth and wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,  
telling them all, over and over, how it is  
that we live forever.

We need to find the courage to face this world and love it -- to stand still and be astonished with our arms open. We can dare to be messengers of rejoicing to those who need it most. Let's stay in the trenches.