

Lift up your hearts



Carla Grosch Miller
concludes our series

SHE stands on the far edge of my paper-strewn desk, between a small singing bowl, perched on its box, and a framed poem, “The Journey” by Mary Oliver. I have carried *The Song of the Lark* (Jules Adolphe Breton, 1884) with me in some form or another for more than 40 years. Today, she is in a block white frame, bought for something else, but better suited to her.

I believe that I first met her the day I played hooky from school. It was the spring of our last year. My best mate, Kathy Torpin, and I — each a goody-two-shoes kind of girl — decided to bunk off and take the train 26 miles to the big city. I don’t know what was more thrilling: that we would dare to just not show up where we belonged, or the trip into Chicago. We felt wild, and grown up, and pleased with ourselves.

The day was long and wonderful, spent walking up and down city blocks, memorising street names of American presidents, chattering incessantly, and dropping into the cultural gems of that great city on the edge of the inland sea that is Lake Michigan: the crown jewel of the Art Institute, where I stood and gazed at her for a minute that felt to be an hour, her longing meeting mine; the far-flung heaven of the Planetarium, where we leaned back into a *faux* night sky and wondered at our place in the universe; the windswept spray of Buckingham Fountain.



I PROBABLY bought my first postcard of her that day. The one that graces my desk now is too clean and fresh to be the original. Why her? Barefoot, babushka-ed, scythe in hand, foot and gaze forward, she embodies my Northern European peasant genes and my small-town desire for something greater.

The sun is setting to her west, but her eyes are fixed to my north-east — to the Northumbrian sky framed by my window. We landed here four years ago, 13 years after my emigration to the UK. She has seen other vistas: Cambridge, Massachusetts; Chicago; Kotzebue and Anchorage, Alaska; Berkeley, California; Chicago; Taunton; Oxford.

I look to her now as a source of strength. I like the old meaning of the word “comfort”: to strengthen. Her gaze towards a better day recalls me to myself; to the longing for a better world which has shaped my life and work from early days.

I spent years as a poverty and civil-rights attorney before hearing a call into ministry. The prophet’s cry for justice goes right to my heart. The passage of scripture which has framed my vocation — before and after ordination — is **Isaiah 58.1-12**: “Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice. . . The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you will be like a watered garden. . . You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.” A tidy summing-up of human purpose.

SHE continues to look ahead. Is she listening, open-mouthed, to the song of a skylark, whose song-

flight seeks to enchant a mate for the new day? Birdsong was the first gift of lockdown, as the earth and her creatures began to breathe more deeply without the grasping of our greedy maw. Something Arundhati Roy said comes to mind: “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.”

The music that has been balm to my soul is a *Pie Jesu* written by Mary Lynn Lightfoot, in memory of the children killed by home-grown terrorists in the 1995 Murrah Federal Building bombing in

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Oklahoma City. The emotional roller-coaster of the pandemic has been such that, sometimes, I cannot let myself feel the horror and grief of these times. When I do feel it, I sit at my piano before the five tattered, taped-together pages of the score, and play it over and over.

I HAVE been immersed in reading nature writing in the hours when I'm not researching, writing, or Zooming about congregational trauma as part of the Tragedy and Congregations team (tragedyandcongregations.org.uk).

First, *How to read water*, to help me get to grips with the most soul- and body-strengthening thing I do: year-round skins swimming in the North Sea (thank goodness I could resume that a few weeks ago — in desperation, I had waded into the Wansbeck river that meanders through

Morpeth). Now, *Underland* by Robert MacFarlane.

I had forgotten how claustrophobic I was. The chapters on caving were a white-knuckle ride. Now, I am in the more familiar setting of cold and sea, as he traverses walls of Arctic ice and sea-cliffs to visit prehistoric cave-paintings. MacFarlane's writing is so sumptuous that I will follow him anywhere, beyond my deepest fears. These days, it is connection to the earth which is sustaining me.

FINALLY, a prayer. Early in my ministry, I stumbled on this **prayer from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin** in his book *Hymn of the Universe* (1961; English translation, Harper & Row, 1965) and copied it into my journal so that I would have it with me for all time:

“When the erosions of age begin to leave their mark on my body, and still more on my mind; when the ills that must diminish

my life or put an end to it strike me down from without or grow up from within me; when I reach that painful moment when I suddenly realise that I am a sick [woman] or that I am growing old; above all at the final moment when I feel that I am losing hold on myself and becoming wholly passive in the hands of those great unknown forces which first formed me: at all these sombre moments grant me, Lord, to understand that it is You (provided my faith is strong enough) who are painfully separating the fibres of my being so as to penetrate to the very marrow of my substance and draw me to Yourself.”

This I long for: the coming of the new day, and peace at the end.

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A great ale-feast for the King of Kings

THIS is the last in our Lift Up Your Hearts series, with thanks to all who have contributed to it — and distributed copies of the A4 version to people unable to leave their homes.

We're aware that the pandemic isn't over, and that many people will have to continue to self-isolate on health grounds; also that church services, although starting up again, are still being treated with caution.

None the less, the national lockdown as such is almost over, never, we hope, to return. We will be monitoring progress in the rest of the paper.

In recognition of the easing of social-distancing restrictions, especially with regards to bars, we end with an Irish poem/



prayer from the tenth or 11th century, its author unknown:

I should like to have a great ale-feast for the King of Kings;

I should like the heavenly Host to be

drinking it for all eternity.
I should like to have the fruits of Faith, of pure devotion;
I should like to have the seats of Repentance in my house.
I should like to have the men of Heaven in my own dwelling;
I should like the tubs of Long-Suffering to be at their service.
I should like to have the vessels of Charity to dispense;
I should like to have the pitchers of Mercy for their company.
I should like there to be Hospitality for their sake;
I should like Jesus to be here always.
I should like to have the Three Marys of glorious renown;
I should like to have the Heavenly Host from every side.
I should like to be a rent-payer to the Lord; he to whom He gives a good blessing has done well in suffering distress.

From A Celtic Miscellany, selected and translated by Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson (Penguin, 1971)

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