



BetterTogether™
in a box

Heschel's "Radical Amazement" Resource

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About Radical Amazement

What is “Radical Amazement?”

“Radical Amazement” (RA) is a big Jewish idea brought to life by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. RA challenges us to not take life for granted. Rather, it offers a blueprint for engaging with the world - through an ongoing process of awe and active appreciation. Heschel’s “Radical Amazement” provides a blueprint for living life to the fullest. It’s like a Jewish “carpe diem,” seize the day.

Why offer Radical Amazement as part of our Better Together work?

Radical Amazement represents a vital idea that counteracts the cynicism, busy-ness and lack of “presence” many teens experience on a daily basis. RA asks teens to notice, celebrate and be in wonder about the world around them, and to appreciate all the current moment has to offer. It’s a Jewish tool that combines ancient ideas of gratitude with modern concepts of mindfulness. For elders, “Radical Amazement” provides a view away from monotony and into a world that holds much to be celebrated and enjoyed. Together, teens and elders can use “radical amazement” as a frame for deeper connection into the things and ideas they appreciate, sharing what excites them and what each wants to celebrate.

Another Lens to Consider:

Heschel’s “Radical Amazement” also acts as a reminder about the importance of prayer not as a way to ask for things or even to be grateful but in Heschel’s words “to praise and sing” about all that fills us with awe. In this lesson, we invite you to challenge the learners to try one or two methodologies - meditation, prayer or poetry writing - that might make them uncomfortable at first. One of the truly amazing parts of Heschel’s RA lies in his reminding us that we have lost our connection to what is awe-inspiring. We must work - even through discomfort - to find our way back to inspiration and amazement.

NOTE: Please take the time to dive into the **quotes** from Heschel about “Radical Amazement” before teaching this lesson. They are quite dense ideas, and you (as the lead educator) might want to take some time to let them roll around in your head before offering them to others.



Teen Program

Materials (to send, have available for them or to have them collect)

- Heschel "Radical Amazement" Quotes page - one copy per teen. It can be double sided.
- Mandala Art: each teen gets a set of 3-5 Mandala black and white mandala images from which to choose. I recommend the pdf [here](#).
- Teens will also need - post-it notes, markers or colored pencils, and pencils and/or pens
- If online, build a Padlet for Reflection - you can use [this](#) as an example.

In Advance

Ask the teens to find at least three, but no more than five images or items that fill them with wonder or inspire them. They can be quotes, pictures of places or things, a painting, smells, an item/s, or a song that really inspires them. They should come to the teen session ready to share these 3-5 "wondrous and amazing" things with each other. Please include a reminder about this pre-homework in a reminder message. This will help set the stage for a conversation about the idea of "radical amazement."

Lesson Framing

Abraham Joshua Heschel (January 11, 1907 – December 23, 1972) was a Polish-born American rabbi and one of the leading Jewish theologians and Jewish philosophers of the 20th century. Heschel, a professor of Jewish mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, authored a number of widely read books on Jewish philosophy and was a leader in the civil rights movement.

One of Heschel's big ideas is "Radical Amazement." As mentioned above, Heschel constructed his thoughts about this idea as a way to counteract the cynicism and lack of wonder he noticed in post World War II Americans, especially his students. This lesson aims to help teens understand this idea, to consider what fills them with wonder and awe, and to translate this idea into a lived experience - a tool they can use any day.



Our theme today focuses on the idea offered by a great Jewish thinker, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. This idea is “radical amazement.” Heschel asks us not to take anything in our lives for granted. Before we dive deeply into this concept, we will start our session with a sort of “show and tell.”

I asked that before you arrived you find 3-5 images, items, quotes, a song, art or other expression that fills you with wonder and awe. Please pick one thing you want to share with the big group, one thing to share in a small group and a final item that you are excited to share with your elder partners. While you pick where to “place” each item, I invite those of you who maybe forgot this to take a minute (you can use your phones or computer) to find at least 1-2 items that fill you with amazement.

To share in the large group, please ask each participant to show, play or explain the item they brought for the whole group. If there’s time, or if you prefer, you could split the teens into small groups (whether in person or on Zoom) to share their item, art, song or image. Remind teens to explain both the item and why/how it fills them with amazement. Ask the teens who are not presenting to write down their responses to the following questions, while listening to their peers. If in person, they could write each response on a post-it note. If on Zoom, each note could go onto a **Padlet page** (this link is an example of a Padlet the educator could create before starting online Zoom session). They could respond to these questions while listening:

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1 How do you share this sense of wonder about the thing they are sharing? | 2 What words do you hear them using to describe their sense of awe or inspiration? (What trends do you notice?) |
|--|--|

When finished with sharing in the big group and/or small groups, ask the teens to take all their post-it notes and put them up on a wall or whiteboard. (If on Zoom, they can look at the Padlet.) They are now to start putting them into groups or categories. (It doesn’t really matter how they get grouped, the goal here is to get them engaging together about the ideas of wonder, awe and amazement.)

Then ask the teens to explain their grouping choices.



Split the teens into groups of 3-4 people each. Ask them to pull out their Heschel "Radical Amazement" Quotes sheets for this lesson. Assign each group 1-3 quotes from the list. Try to make sure that each group has a separate quote from the other. You might even want to pre-assign before mailing/delivering the quotes sheet. For example, quote #1 might be for group 1 for Jonah, Lila and Isaac's group - which you would write on the quotes sheet.

Put them in their breakout groups for three minutes (either in person or online). In small groups, the teens are to:

- 1 | Read the quote/s out loud (maybe a few times)
- 2 | Decode it. What is Heschel really trying to say?
- 3 | Do you agree or disagree with this quote? Why? Or How?
- 4 | What do you think Heschel witnessed that made him want to write about this idea?
- 5 | Is it possible to live in a state of "radical amazement" at all times?



After they've had 3-5 minutes to wrestle with their quotes, have them come back and each group present one to two points of discussion from their group to each other.

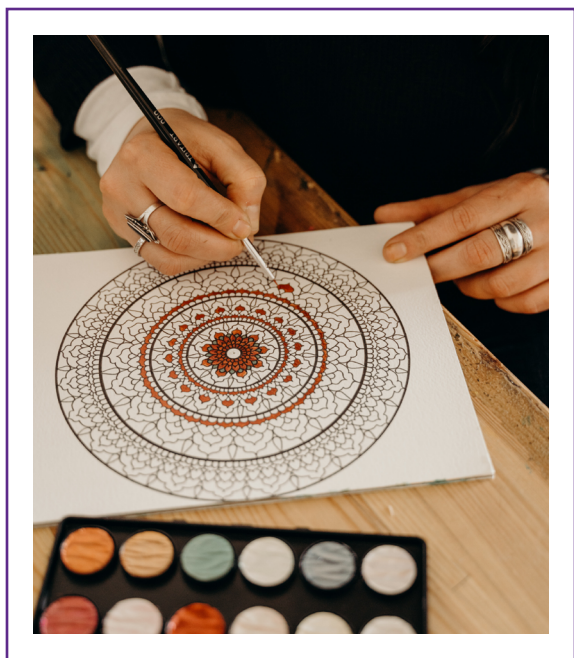
Once each group has shared, send them back into their small groups with this challenge: Each group now must turn one quote into a meme that does its best to express what Heschel is trying to say. Give them another 3-5 minutes to construct the meme. (If needed, Meme Generators can be found [here](#) or [here](#).) Again, bring them back into the big group to share their memes and the quote that goes along with it.

OPTIONAL ACTIVITY

Mandala construction as active “radical amazement” (10 - 15 min)

Introduce the idea of mandalas as a form of quiet reflection, sometimes used as prayer and sometimes just a creative expression. You can even share print outs or a share screen of **Sharon Belknap** or **Day Schildkret’s** nature mandala art. Invite the teens look at these images while listening to music you will play for them which embodies the spirit of “Radical Amazement.” (Feel free to use the recommended playlist below or play 1-2 songs the teens brought to share at the beginning of class.) Encourage them to use this time as quiet contemplation, appreciating the colors, the shapes or the feel of the items they are using.

- 1 | Pick a mandala print-out and color with markers, crayons or colored pencils while thinking about “Radical Amazement”
- 2 | Go outside and get 3-5 groups of 5-8 petals or leaves or other nature items each and construct them into concentric circles, like a mandala.



After 5-10 minutes (judge the energy of the room), ask if any teens are willing to share their art and how it feels “wondrous” or “amazing?” This is a great time to ask teens to take a selfie with their art too!

PART 3

Sharing our sense of wonder, awe and amazement about and with your elder partners (15 min)

Educators, ask teens, “what is amazing or awe inspiring about either your elder partner/s or the relationship you are constructing with them?” Have each one share at least one thought. If they aren’t talking much, have them share in the chat (if on Zoom) or in person ask them to write it down on a post-it note, fold it and put into a basket. Then have each teen pick one note and read it aloud until all have done this. You could build more wonder by asking the teens to snap or do “jazz hands” any time they hear a comment they agree with.

Once each teen has shared at least one answer to this question, ask them to individually construct either a video, a card, a mandala art piece or other expressive note that can be delivered to their elder partner/s which tells them directly what it is about them that fills you with a sense of “radical amazement.” Challenge them to first explain Heschel’s idea and then apply it to them and/or to their growing intergenerational (teen-elder) relationship.

(Educators - these videos, cards or art pieces will need to be delivered to the elders prior to the elder session.)



PART 4

Closing

Ask teens to reflect back on this session and finish this sentence - each person sharing at least once in “popcorn” style (where once one person is done speaking, they call on another person in the group to speak).

“Radical Amazement is an important tool because it _____”

Senior Activity

Because each community and senior center may have different COVID-19 related restrictions at different times, a range of options has been provided which meet different needs.

All of these options assume that each elder will get the teens' video or card which explains something about Heschel's "Radical Amazement" and expresses some level of awe about their growing relationship. It will be important for seniors to have received and read or listened to these items before this meeting.

Here is the list of items that should be included for elders and teens prior to this part:

- "Radical Amazement" Response by each teen: individual recording, card or art (as listed above), created by each teen
- Heschel Quotes Sheet (should be copied in LARGE font)
- Audio and/or video recording of a teen (or two) reading the Alden Solovy and Mary Oliver poems, this can be on the e-card or via an online website
- Double Sided document with both the poem by Alden Solovy and Mary Oliver (copied in LARGE font)

For each option, there is a template cover letter that program facilitators should include in their package to individual seniors or to a senior site coordinator.

Activity Options

1

Non-Electronic Activity - Listening to and/or Reading Poetry about "Radical Amazement"

This exercise invites elders to learn about the idea of Radical Amazement from text sheets and from two poems that express this idea. Elders are asked to write back to the teens with what fills them with wonder and are invited to share a small item from nature and/or a poem that they enjoy.

ACTIONS

Educators

will provide the text sheet of Heschel and Solovy/Oliver poems, and a self-addressed and stamped envelope along with an "awe and wonder" card to the elders or senior facility.

Time: 5-10 minutes (depending on the teen recording process)

Seniors

will read the sheets, answer the "awe" question on the provided card and find a small nature item and/or poem to include with the returned envelope.

Dear Better Together Partner,

Shalom! This month we are doing a deep dive into the idea of “Radical Amazement,” as brought to the world by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Enclosed you will find a text sheet of Heschel’s ideas, as well and two poems. The first poem is by Jewish poet, Alden Solovy “The Rhythm of Wonder.” The second poem is “The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver. We invite you to read all documents. When you are done, we hope that you will write on the enclosed note and send it back to us, telling us something that fills you with awe or wonder. If possible, could also take a walk outside and find a leaf, petal or blade of grass that makes you feel the awe of nature. Alternatively, do you have a favorite poem? Would you copy it or write it out and share it with us? Please include the item from nature or the poem with your letter. Our Better Together teens really want to hear from you!

Warmly,
Better Together Program Coordinator



2

Electronic Asynchronous

This exercise invites elders to learn about the idea of Radical Amazement, to hear the teens explain it and to also hear poetry that brings the idea more to light. Elders are asked to write back to the teens with what fills them with wonder and are invited to share a small item from nature and/or a poem that they enjoy.

ACTIONS

Educators

will provide the recordings, the text sheet of Heschel and Solovy/Oliver poems, and a self-addressed and stamped envelope along with an “awe and wonder” card to the elders or senior facility.

Time: 5-10 minutes (depending on the teen recording process)

Teens

will record their thoughts (as done during the teen session), along with a recording of the Solovy and Oliver poems back to the Educator.

Time: 5-10 minutes, which will happen during the teen session.

Seniors

will listen to the recordings, answer the “awe” question on the provided card and find a small nature item and/or poem to include with the returned envelope.

Dear Better Together Partner,

Shalom! This month we are doing a deep dive into the idea of “Radical Amazement,” as brought to the world by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Enclosed you will find two recordings from your teen Better Together partner - one that is their explanation for you about “Radical Amazement” and their response to it. The second recording offers two poems that also reflect on this idea. The first is by Jewish poet, Alden Solovy “The Rhythm of Wonder.” The second poem is “The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver. We invite you to listen to both recordings. When you are done, we hope that you will write on the enclosed note and send it back to us, telling us something that fills you with awe or wonder. If possible, could also take a walk outside and find a leaf, petal or blade of grass that makes you feel the awe of nature. Alternatively, do you have a favorite poem? Would you copy it or write it out and share it with us? Please include the item from nature or the poem with your letter. Our Better Together teens really want to hear from you!

Warmly,
Better Together Program Coordinator

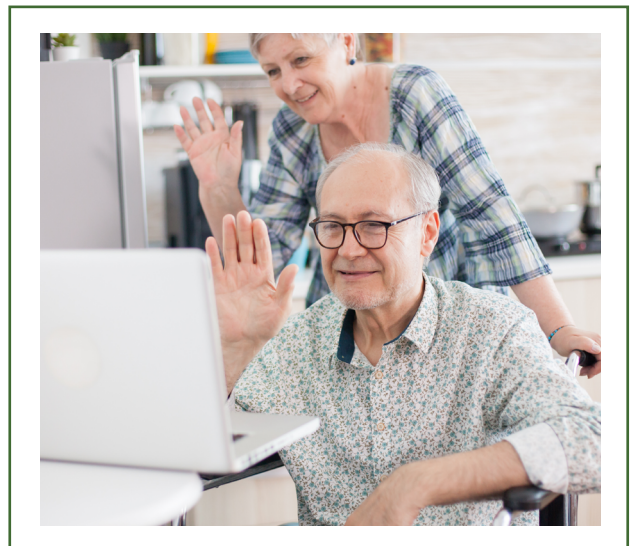
3

Synchronous Virtual Activity - Shared Poetry Reading & Study

This session includes a chance for the teens and elders to engage in (limited) text study about Heschel’s “Radical Amazement,” to read poetry that reflects on this idea and to co-construct ideas about how they express awe and wonder in their lives.

First, teens will introduce their favorite 2-4 quotes from Heschel about “Radical Amazement.” Teens could do this by sharing the memes they created in the teen session, or just showing it in large font on the Zoom screen. The educator will put teens into small groups with elders to discuss the following:

- 1 | How does each person interpret these quotes?
- 2 | How do you agree and/or disagree with these ideas, as offered by Heschel?
- 3 | How might you apply this idea to your daily life?



Secondly, the small groups will come back together. Now they will do some poetry reading and listening together. The educator shares that one of the teens will read the poem, “The Rhythm of Wonder.” Before they start reading the program facilitator will both display the poem onto the Zoom share screen and invite people to follow along on the printout they have of the poem. Announce that we will read it twice. While it is being read the first time, ask the listeners to just listen or listen and ready along - taking in the beauty of the words and imagining what the author is describing. After the first reading explain that Alden Solovy wrote this poem after taking a class about Heschel’s “Radical Amazement.” Then have another teen read it a second time. This time, ask the listeners to highlight any words or phrases in the poem that really speak to you about radical amazement. Once the poem is finished, ask elders and teens to share what parts they highlighted. How did poetry further highlight the idea of “radical amazement?”

If time, go through a similar process with the Mary Oliver poem, “The Summer Day.”

Finally, end with elders and teens sharing how this idea makes them think differently about being present in the world and noticing the world with a sense of awe and wonder? How might things feel different now?

ACTIONS	Educators	Teens	Seniors
	will provide the text sheet of Heschel and Solovy/Oliver poems, to the elders or senior facility.	practice leading text study with the elders and two will be ready to ready the poems.	will have the materials ready as part of the Zoom session.
	<i>Time: 5-10 minutes (depending on the teen recording process)</i>	<i>Time: 5-10 minutes, which will happen during the teen session.</i>	

NOTE: *If teens and elders can meet in person, this lesson can be very easily shifted for that format.*

Dear Better Together Partner,

Shalom! This month we are doing a deep dive into the idea of “Radical Amazement,” as brought to the world by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Enclosed you will find a few text sheets. The first are quotes by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel about “Radical Amazement.” On the second sheet you will find two poems - Alden Solovy’s “The Rhythm of Wonder” and “The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver. We are excited to “see” you online very soon!

Warmly, Better Together Program Coordinator



4

Buddy Box: Silk Flower Arrangements!

This exercise invites elders to learn about the idea of Radical Amazement, to hear the teens explain it and to also hear poetry that brings the idea more to light. Elders are asked to write back to the teens with what fills them with wonder and are invited to share a small item from nature and/or a poem that they enjoy.

Seniors will also appreciate receiving silk flower arrangements (example [here](#)) from their teen partners. Flowers are a great way to appreciate nature. Silk flowers allow the appreciation to happen for a longer period of time. Include a small vase (ideally with a Better Together sticker on it) and five - eight color coordinated silk flowers per vase. In order to continue the feeling of awe and wonder, you could also include delicious chocolate and/or an art print of a Jewish mandala.

Recommended Sources for purchasing silk flowers and vases:

- **Michael's**, and **JoAnn's** both have a great array of silk flowers and glass vases ranging from (\$2-\$8 per person) which you could buy in person or order online
- **IKEA** also has lovely pre-made silk flower arrangements
- Vista Print, Moo.com, PSPrint.com and StickerMule are great online sites to upload a logo and order stickers



ACTIONS**Educators**

will provide the recordings, the text sheet of Heschel and Solovy/Oliver poems, the boxes with the vase and flowers, and a self-addressed and stamped envelope along with an “awe and wonder” card to the elders or senior facility.

Time: 20 minutes (depending on the teen recording process)

Teens

will record their thoughts (as done during the teen session), help construct the flowers into the vase, and include a recording of the Solovy and Oliver poems back to the Educator.

Time: 5-10 minutes, which will happen during the teen session.

Seniors

will listen to the recordings, enjoy their flowers and treats, answer the “awe” question on the provided card and find a small nature item and/or poem to include with the returned envelope.

Dear Better Together Partner,

Shalom! This month we are doing a deep dive into the idea of “Radical Amazement,” as brought to the world by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Enclosed you will find two recordings from your teen Better Together partner - one that is their explanation for you about “Radical Amazement” and their response to it. The second recording offers two poems that also reflect on this idea. The first is by Jewish poet, Alden Solovy “The Rhythm of Wonder.” The second poem is “The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver. We invite you to listen to both recordings. Also included in this box are some items that we hope will fill you with awe and wonder. They are some yummy treats for your senses and a beautiful bouquet of silk flowers to fill your eyes with beauty.

When you are done with the recordings, we hope that you will write on the enclosed note and send it back to us, telling us something that fills you with awe or wonder. If possible, could also take a walk outside and find a leaf, petal or blade of grass that makes you feel the awe of nature. Alternatively, do you have a favorite poem? Would you copy it or write it out and share it with us? Please include the item from nature or the poem with your letter. Our Better Together teens really want to hear from you!

Warmly,
Better Together Program Coordinator

Key Questions:

- Why does Heschel make the case for radical amazement? How do you feel about this idea? What are the advantages? What are the disadvantages?
- What ways can we express radical amazement?
- How can living in this state SERVE us, our families and our communities?

Source Pages:

- Primary Source Material: Abraham Joshua Heschel, "God in Search of Man"
- **"The Rhythm of Wonder, A Prayer for Radical Amazement"** by Alden Solovy
- **"When Death Comes"** by Mary Oliver
- A great Podcast about Heschel: **On Being with Krista Tippett interviewing Arnold Eisen**

Resources for this Lesson:

- Playlist:

"Beautiful Day"	"Beautiful Day"	"Clair de Lune"	"Lovely Day"
by U2	by Mary J. Blige	by Claude DeBussy	by Bill Withers
- Mary Oliver Interview from **"On Being"**

Other Activity Option Brainstorm:

- Guided Meditation
- Prayer Activity based on Pokeach Ivrim
- Construct a Prayer (based on the guided meditation)
- Quote Walk or Quote Website (in person or other...)
- Art: Painting or Drawing with Color that fills you with AWE. Layer. Be bold.
- Linoit Board or Padlet to take notes of the conversation, or as reflection piece
- The Birkat Hashachar prayer, which we say as part of the morning Shacharit prayer service

Quotes Page

Abraham Joshua Heschel on "Radical Amazement"

"Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement... get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed."

Source: God in Search of Man

"What we lack," Heschel said, "is not a will to believe but a will to wonder."

Source: God in Search of Man

"People of our time are losing the power of celebration. Instead of celebrating we seek to be amused or entertained. Celebration is an active state, an act of expressing reverence or appreciation. To be entertained is a passive state - it is to receive pleasure afforded by an amusing act or a spectacle.... Celebration is a confrontation, giving attention to the transcendent meaning of one's actions."

Source: The Wisdom of Heschel

"Awareness of the divine begins with wonder."

Source: Between God and Man, page 41

"As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder. "

Source: God In Search of Man, page 46

"Awe is an intuition for the dignity of all things, a realization that things not only are what they are but also stand, however remotely, for something supreme," Heschel wrote. "Awe is a sense for transcendence, for the reference everywhere to mystery beyond all things."

Source: God in Search of Man

"The sense for the "miracles which are daily with us," the sense for the "continual marvels," is the source of prayer. There is no worship, no music, no love, if we take for granted the blessings or defeats of living. No routine of the social, physical, or physiological order must dull our sense of surprise at the fact that there is a social, a physical, or a physiological order. We are trained in maintaining our sense of wonder by uttering a prayer before the enjoyment of food. Each time we are about to drink a glass of water, we remind ourselves of the eternal mystery of creation, "Blessed be Thou...by Whose word all things come into being." A trivial act and a reference to the supreme miracle. Wishing to eat bread or fruit, to enjoy a pleasant fragrance or a cup of wine; on tasting fruit in season for the first time; on seeing a rainbow, or the ocean; or noticing trees when they blossom; on meeting a sage in Torah or in secular learning; on hearing good or bad tidings – we are taught to invoke His great name and our awareness of Him. Even on performing a physiological function we say "Blessed be Thou...who healest all flesh and doest wonders." This is one of the goals of the Jewish way of living: to experience commonplace deeds as spiritual adventures, to feel the hidden love and wisdom in all things."

Source: God In Search of Man, page 49

"I would say about individuals, an individual dies when they cease to be surprised. I am surprised every morning when I see the sun shine again. When I see an act of evil I don't accommodate, I don't accommodate myself to the violence that goes on everywhere. I am still so surprised! That is why I am against it. We must learn to be surprised."

Source: A Friendship in the Prophetic Tradition by Susannah Heschel

"The primary purpose of prayer is not to make request. The primary purpose is to praise, to sing, to chant. Because the essence of prayer is a song, and man cannot live without a song."

Source: Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity

The Rhythm of Wonder by Alden Solovy

When the mountains sing,
When the seas dance,
When a crescent moon glides the heavens
And the sun lifts day from night,
When the rivers waltz to hymns of rain,
And the oceans drum on cliffs of stone,
When the caper bush wakes
And the wild iris blooms,
Remember this,
It's not the wind that lifts the eagle.
The eagle lifts the wind.

You are the love
That frees the baritone hills
And the pirouette skies,
A shaft of light to loose the crescendos of glory
And the colors of awe,
A heartbeat summoning the rhythm of wonder,
A yearning to hear the pulse of G-d.

When silence resounds with music,
When darkness radiates light,
When creation reaches up
From the core of the earth,
And eternity is a breeze
From the edge of the universe,
When the call to holiness shines brilliant
In the breathless dawn,
Remember this,
It's not the prayer that lifts the blessing.
The blessing lifts the prayer.

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The Summer Day by Mary Oliver

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?

—Mary Oliver

