

No poetry in politics

By [Debra Dean Murphy](#)

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I felt embarrassment for [Clint Eastwood](#) more than anything else.

He seemed disoriented, disheveled, a little frail. Dirty Harry as a doddering uncle, muttering inappropriate things at the dinner table while everyone averts their eyes, keeps their head down.

But there's also this: Did the Republicans really need one more rich white guy rendering a black person invisible? On TV? In prime time?

Perhaps the most important question in all of this is also the most naive one: How does such a spectacle — not just crazy Clint talking to an empty chair but 21st-century presidential politics, generally — do anything to advance civility and honor and human flourishing (let alone informed decision-making) in our public life?

I don't expect it to be much different when the Democrats gather in Charlotte this week. Same formula: political convention as tightly controlled, carefully composed, neatly packaged product. (That Eastwood's loopy speech slipped through the cracks of the usual scrutiny and scriptedness must surely have some Romney aides averting their eyes, keeping their heads down).

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Aristotle understood politics to be concerned fundamentally with the well-being of citizens. The good life, he believed (happiness; *eudaimonia* in Greek), was the telos — the goal, the end game — of human existence, and participation in the *polis* was the means for realizing this ultimate purpose. In political community, goods are ordered in ways that all persons may flourish, and no person can flourish apart from a just, well-ordered *polis*.

Maybe the problem is that in our context we hear that term — “the good life” — and think of Budweiser commercials. Politics and the *good life*? Politicians are supposed to keep their hands off my good life . . .

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Being immersed, as I am [these days](#), in poetry, I find myself reading lots of Mary Oliver. She is sometimes regarded (even [dismissed](#)) as a mere (mere!) "nature" poet, as someone who writes lovely lines about swans and geese but whose poetry lacks the intellectual heft necessary to be considered Important. Timely. Socially Relevant.

But I find Oliver's meditative poems deeply engaged in the questions of what it means for human beings to flourish and how it is that we should order the goods in our lives for the well-being of all.

We are [made for joy](#), Oliver insists. (Which isn't too far from Aristotle's idea that we are made for happiness). *Tell me, [Oliver asks](#), what it is you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?*

How is this not, at heart, at the root of all that matters, a *political* question?

For Oliver, and for Aristotle in a different sort of way, living into the *telos* of our existence is inseparable from the cultivation of beauty in our lives. The good life is a [beautiful life](#) and can never be fully realized apart from a just, well-ordered *polis*.

But politicians don't talk this way, of course. And neither do their spokespersons, who do odd, embarrassing things like go on television and ask strange, meaningless questions of an empty chair. And we avert our eyes, keep our heads down. For there is no poetry in politics and we are all the poorer for it.

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