

## Wild and Precious Lives

May 29, 2016

Reflections on Mary Oliver's question from her poem "The Summer Day"  
"Tell me, what do you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

*Emma Daley*

Before I answer the question of what I plan to do with my wild and precious life, I would like to invite you to reflect on your own lives for a moment.

Think of a decision from your life you are especially pleased with.

How did you make that decision? ... and how do you know it was a good one?

For me, this comes down to the feeling of aliveness. I make my best decisions when I choose the option around which I feel most expansive. On the surface, that means I don't know what I am going to do with my life. It hasn't told me yet. On a deeper level, though, it means I know exactly what I plan to do, regardless of what happens.

The quote that best describes this for me is from educator and philosopher Howard Thurman. He said, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

In the past, I have felt stumped, frustrated, and even embarrassed that I could not point to a career, activity, or issue and say, "That. That is what I want to do with my life." In college I tried to solve this by looking for big problems in the world I could help address. At some point, though, I realized that I will do the most good in the world when I am centered, peaceful, and happy with myself. There are people who come alive analyzing health care policy or drilling wells in Africa. That's not me, at least not right now. By focusing on what really feeds me, I have cleared space for truer expressions of myself to come through.

So what is it I plan to do with this wild and precious life?

I plan to follow my passions. I plan to find the things I feel alive and expressive doing and do them more. I plan to listen to that first impulse that tells me I want to try something new, before ego swoops in to tell me not to. I plan to sit with myself in silence so I can hear what I've been avoiding, and I plan to treat myself with at least as much care as I treat others. With this precious life, I plan to be intentional about what I give energy or attention to, and to clear things from my life as necessary to give what I am trying to cultivate room to grow.

Sometimes I worry that the things our culture says matter really do matter. But, I've made my wager, and I don't think I can go back. So I will go forward; with this wild and precious life I plan to walk through the fears that would have me stay small, to find out what it is to live from a place of fullness and freedom. I plan to learn to live in deep connection with others, unafraid of getting hurt. I plan to pay attention to and address the root causes of my own suffering, knowing I cannot cure any ills in the world I have not yet healed in myself.

I believe that every decision, every motivation we experience, can be traced back to either love or fear. When I talk about following my passions, I am talking first about discerning between these two states, and then habitually choosing love — that which is most life-affirming, most inclusive, and based on genuine acceptance of things as they are. And yes, it is possible to pay bills or mow the lawn out of love. By building that muscle now, I am planning for a fully alive future in which my commitments feed me and enable me to make my best contributions to the world.

### ***Tim Nelson-Hoy***

What do we do with something wild and precious?

As one trying to be conscious of my environmental impact, my thoughts immediately turn to conservation. Something wild and precious must be kept separate, sacrosanct, preserved from the pollution of our unnatural human world.

This is not the position taken by the speaker of the poem. This poem speaks to us about connecting with nature, of engaging with it, of allowing oneself—*one's*—to be inspired by it.

And I don't want to diminish that. But I do want to take issue with the word "one."

Because if I recognize myself as part of nature, as wild and precious as the black bear and the grasshopper, equally a child of the one who made it as the swan and the whole world itself, I have to recognize that you—you plural, all of you—share equally in that wild and precious fellowship. And I can't practice self-conservation, can't fence myself off as separate, sacrosanct, preserved from the pollution of others.

If I can learn to be idle and blessed kneeling amongst the grass, then I can learn, must learn, to be idle and blessed kneeling—or sitting—in the pews. To be idle and blessed among the UUs. To be idle and blessed among my co-workers. To be idle and blessed even among the Republicans.

It's easy to think of communing with nature as a 2 person activity... Mother Nature and me. Yes, just me, living authentically, all alone in this idyllic forest, or desert, or perhaps a pond in New England.

But if I can learn to be one with nature, sure I can also learn to be one with my neighbors. And if I can't learn to be at one with nature, well, isn't failure better when it's shared with friends?

So I'd like today to speak against conservation, against preserving our wild and precious life from pollution and contamination by our natural human world. I'd like to ask you not to think at all about what you would do with your wild and precious life.

Think instead, what will we do with our wild and precious lives?"

### ***Whitney Wiggins***

Good Morning.

In her poem, "The Summer Day" Mary Oliver asks

what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

For someone like me, an introvert who struggles with depression and anxiety, the question and standing up here today to talk about it, makes me feel like I'm in that awful dream...

where it's suddenly the end of the semester and I realize that the final exam is tomorrow...

and I haven't gone to a single class!

So... what is it that I plan to do with my one wild and precious life?

For some reason, the question makes me think of that famous line from *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* when Yoda is training Luke Skywalker to be a Jedi Knight and he tells Luke to use the Force to raise the X-Wing Fighter from the swamp.

Luke gets all whiney and says he can't. Yoda gives Luke a little more encouragement and finally Luke says "okay, I'll try."

Yoda immediately responds with "No! Do or do not. There is no try."

Although generally, I think Yoda is pretty awesome; I think when it comes to \*real\* life, he gets it wrong.

For me anyway, there is ONLY "try".

And then there's the trying to be okay with merely focusing on trying.

Results - they sure are nagging, aren't they?

My husband and I have gifted the world with two very sensitive children.

They struggle with perfectionism, negative thinking, getting mentally or emotionally stuck, and being afraid of things that aren't likely to actually happen.

One of them seems to think that avoidance or quiet defiance is the solution to all uncomfortable situations and relationships.

I, on the other hand, have never been bull-headed or skirted an issue!

With my one wild and precious life I will focus on TRYING

Trying to be an example for them by continuing to put one foot in front of the other to do the everyday mundane things that can be so hard to do when that gray cloud is following me.

You know the things:

Laundry, planning meals, cleaning bathrooms.

Steadfastly saying, "it's time to get out of bed" or "it's time to do your homework" - over and over and over again - *without losing my cool*

Racing around at the last minute trying to find one last ingredient for the recipe for that dish to pass or the next size up in kid concert clothing-- black shoes, black pants, white shirt (no stains, please) - *without losing my sense of humor*

Chauffeur the kids to school, to the orthodontist, to swim practice, to lessons, and back – again and again and again - *while being supportive and truly present for them.*

And every morning stepping into the chicken run to feed the hens, wearing full battle armor to protect me from that cranky rooster - *while keeping love in my heart and gentle words on my tongue*

(okay maybe a kantankarous rooster isn't mundane or ordinary)

Even more than putting one foot in front of the other, I will TRY to show my children what it looks like to try take healthy risks and truly EMBRACE life

Embracing life has meant...

Helping my kids get certified to scuba dive and squealing in delight beside them when we see gorgeous fish, stunning coral, and other amazing sea life together

Investigating caves together and being brave enough to swim in the cold, dark water

Making crepes with whacky fruit fillings with them every weekend

Taking them to bars and restaurants all over town just so to watch a soccer match, a basketball game or T20 Cricket match on ESPN or Willow TV

And thanks to Clio and Linnie it has meant ---

Determinedly looking out the car window every morning and competing to be the first to spot cattle and shout, "COW! I WIN!"

And standing up in front of a room full of people (okay -- not so full of people) wearing the brightest dress I could ever wear, feeling completely unprepared, and speaking about my one wild and precious life....

Trying to embrace life also means...

I will keep trying to beat my children down the mountain on skis...even though I'll probably never win again

I will keep saying "YES" when my just turned 11 years old son asks if he can sit in my lap and drive the car up our long gravel driveway

I will keep trying to connect and share with people who are kind and loving and brave, as well as with those who aren't any of those things

I will keep trying to assume that others have the best intentions even when they are saying something unkind or judgmental

I will keep trying to express myself honestly and compassionately especially when what I have to say is hard or unpleasant

I will keep trying to love deeply, to listen carefully, and to be braver than I ever thought possible

I will try (over and over again) to give my children that most important and cherished gift - memories.

Memories of my deep love and appreciation for them, memories of real connection to the world around them, and memories of stepping out of their comfort zone.

Not tip-toeing through life, but like the grasshopper in the poem - flinging myself out of the grass and eating sugar out of the hand that is offered to me

Accepting that we are unfinished projects and embracing the challenge of growing and learning that lies ahead.

As I've gotten older, I've come to appreciate that life is incredibly fragile. Friends and relatives become ill and die, we see and feel more and more loss. So...

I will try to appreciate the moment...

I will keep being excited over the books that the kids want to share with me, the ones they read out loud to me in the car on the way to school – because one day they may not want to read them to me anymore

I will keep trying to appreciate the sound of them singing pop songs (sometimes really awful pop songs) at the top of their lungs – because one day they may be too embarrassed to sing

I will try to notice every beautiful sunrise, every autumn hillside, and every starry night and try to speak my gratitude

Gratitude for it and for that feeling of connection to something greater than myself

I will try to stop fretting about whether what I'm saying makes any sense or what to make for dinner or how my daughter's transition to High School will go...

and instead sit back and enjoy and appreciate this moment.

And tell my children that I will always love them, no matter what.

Because everything and everyone does die eventually – and sometimes too soon.

### ***Karl Fitzke***

In the Blue Trunks, 6 foot tall, 187 pounds, 54 years old, and having 15 years ago:

Survived Thyroid cancer

And

Left a successful but overtime-laden engineering career behind, wanting to spend more time with family and friends and connect with more artistic pursuits, including life in an intentional community, an ongoing work of art itself...

And having three years ago:

Been profoundly changed, witnessing and dealing with the death of his father and degrading health of his mother due to Parkinson's disease...

Recently relieved of active daily responsibilities of parenthood alongside Aileen, his partner of 30 years...

Karl Fitzke!

### **What is it I plan to do with the rest of my one wild and precious life?**

Well, I'm watching my sons enter adulthood and spending their time with very nice friends, including close girlfriends. I hope we'll have some grandchildren to happily help take care of some day. We'll see. No rush. In the mean time....

At Cornell's Olin Library, I recently began work connected to the preservation of a fascinating variety of unique university-wide audio-visual materials. And I continue to enjoy a little live sound engineering on the side, and will boast having done shows with both of our guests today.

I'll stay this course for the next three years or so, affording Aileen the chance to take a turn making much bigger changes occupationally. We do that from time to time - supporting one another that way. We decided to be flexible when we got married, being unsure of what we imagined ourselves doing beyond the first five to ten years. An unintended benefit is that we haven't been stuck with the same life for 30 years. It and the marriage stay fresh.

Anyway, these days Aileen is not usually here, but instead living full-time in Cambridge, MA, at graduate school. She is studying to get a Masters in Divinity and become ordained as a UU minister. Being without her has given me the opportunity to be more independent again, simplify daily life in some respects, and to think about and appreciate what is important to me.

So far, I'm still liking the idea of continuing to share my life with this wonderful person, who remains interesting, smart, kind, and very attractive to me after all these years. You feel the same way about us, right A?....I've got witnesses here.

Well anyway, I believe I know WHO I'll be spending my life with. I'm not absolutely sure WHERE, despite great hopes on our part to remain here in Ithaca once Aileen finishes her current program. We'll see what the universe opens up to us. Now to the question of WHAT I in particular will be doing...

I'm already happy to be receiving support in further developing a more artistic side of myself from artists and educators that I've provided technical support to since coming to Ithaca.

Examples include wanting to return to photographic arts and improve my musical sight reading. I've been improvising electro-acoustic movie music with a friend. We played our first show out in front of others a few months ago. And this week I graciously accepted an invitation to learn some of the creative process of a noted Ithaca composer and keyboardist. Opportunity has come knocking...or it always has and I just hear it better when I have some level of intention and show up in appropriate places at appropriate times.

I've had to curtail a lot of charitable work for the past few years as I've tended to issues with my parents health in NJ. Someday I'd like to get back to rewarding work, engineering sound at benefit concerts for example.

Over the past three or four years I've gotten A LOT more politically active, trying to bring an end to corporate personhood, and resisting foul fracking forces. No sense letting up there.

I want to spend more time just being, fretting less over conventional ideas of productivity. Mary Oliver's poem is a call to this idea. And her examples from nature are a reminder to us all to better connect with everything that ultimately sustains us. That includes some time off from work as we know it.

And there are lots of other things I'll continue to do to stay in good physical and mental shape. But like futile "fetishists of life extending youthening trends" scattered about the stage in the libretto for an instrumental piece of music by Frank Zappa named "Beat the Reaper," I ought to face the fact that despite great effort, the Guy with the Scythe is a comin' someday.

I will close saying that I will also spend what I have left of my wild and precious life doing what I can to better identify and let go of things that I don't like but can not change. Roll with the punches that are coming...and these days I sometimes wake up feeling like my body has taken a few of them! Watching and listening to people who have gone before me, it is very clear that this is what it will take to grow old gracefully. But that shouldn't rule out making a little noise from time to time too and perhaps go out with a bang instead of a whimper.

### ***Marie McRae***

I'm gonna be a glad old woman, but before I can tell you what I will do with the remainder of my wild and precious life, I will tell you some of the underlying structure I have built along the way.

Above, below, and around all else in my life is the fact that I live with horses. Let me explain.

I live with horses like a composer lives with music, like a distance sailor lives with the ocean. I live with horses. Most of my life, since toddlerhood, has been spent following that muse.

Though it took me 13 years to get my first horse, by the time I was in my mid teens, with no formal instruction, I was an excellent rider and in demand as a show rider. My mother's threats to sell my horse blackmailed me into enrolling at the University of Massachusetts where to my astonishment and delight I discovered they had horse barn and a herd of Morgans. What joy! In the summer between my sophomore and junior years I became the first woman to win the coveted Justin Morgan Award at the National Morgan Show and I did it on a UMass horse. But that was before everything was quantified by "first of" this or that, and I was only called an upstart.

In my mid twenties, with a husband flying planes in Vietnam, and just on a whim, I took my toddler daughter to a summer music festival called Woodstock. It was a life changing experience. In the aftermath I lived through a divorce and then made two important liberating decisions that I still hold today. I decided never again to own a television and decided that I would no longer participate in funding war.

To satisfy that personal vow I embarked on a low income lifestyle that has brought me more riches than I could possibly have imagined then. It allowed me to earn my living in interesting and creative ways while I raised my daughter as a single parent. I learned how to start with a sheep and make my own clothes, how to start with seeds and feed my family through the winter. I bought a fixer upper house and had great fun learning all the skills necessary to re-do the walls, and the wiring, and the plumbing.

When I was 30 I met a man with whom I have enjoyed a, now 40 year, relationship. It hasn't been a straight line, and it hasn't always been pretty, but I think we are starting to figure it out, and I look forward to the next 40.

On my 40th birthday I bought the horse farm of my dreams, where we continue to live today. Through my fifties I taught riders, trained horses, and took up competitive hundred mile riding. About 8 years ago, when our lives and the farm were threatened by gas drilling, I became a reluctant activist and I bought another house just over the hill from the farm. That one will remain a rental until and unless we decide to retire there -- but at least there is the skeleton of a retirement plan in place.

My one wild and precious life continues to be a wonderful adventure. I walk barefoot through the garden. I'm going to be fond of my friends, continue to cut my own hair and drive my own nails. I'm gonna plant 6 million flowers, and enjoy the company of my family. I'll gladly help guide people to good energy use decisions for the future of the planet. I look forward to whatever new things I can learn tomorrow.

### *John Gaines*

#### **What Is It I Plan to Do With My One Wild and Precious Life?**

At 71, with my professional life behind me and much of my family grown and settled, it would be easier to talk about what I have done with my life, whether or not it has been “wild and precious.” But that was not the assignment and I can't be too wild here by ignoring the assignment, or can I? Umm, what would Mary Oliver do?

Let me focus on the **Plan** Part – What Is It I **Plan** To Do With My One Wild and Precious Life? Of course, I **plan** to be fully involved with our family and to travel. But what do I **plan** beyond that?

My professional life was public service. That was not really **planned**, but that is what happened and it worked out just fine. I have also been active in non-professional matters, for example Hospitality Teams. I expect that I will **plan** to continue to try to be “of service” for the balance of my “wild and precious” life.

But how do those **plans** work out? Let's look at an example.

A friend worked on me for years to join the Foodnet Meals on Wheels Board. At last I gave in and agreed to serve thinking we could ride to meetings together. Then I found out his term on the Board was completed. But I had agreed to serve so I did. I met new people and reconnected with others I had known. In my second year I agreed to take on the role of Treasurer. That was a safe enough choice, still being “of service” without being in charge.

In my third year [this one] they needed a Chair of the Board. Now this is getting closer to the “wild” side. Did I really want to be in charge, particularly since our 30-year founding Executive Director [Steve



Griffin, some of you no doubt know Steve] was edging towards retirement? I agreed to be Chair earlier this year and Steve's edging turned into a full sloop – he is leaving at the end of the year. .

So much for my cautious **plan** to be “of service” by quietly sitting on the Board. Now I am in charge of forming a Search Committee, creating a Transition Team, and working to help the entire community celebrate Steve's tenure at Foodnet, while at the same time shepherding the process that will bring us the best possible Executive Director for what we can afford to pay.

Since Steve's announcement it has been a “wild” ride and I expect that it will continue to be. But that “wild” ride has given me connections with Foodnet staff and others in the community working to make things better. And that has been very rewarding for me.

Where I am now is not where I “**planned**” to be, even in this Foodnet example, but I have no regrets that it did not all go as “**planned.**” I am able to contribute and help out and that is a good use for what could be called “my precious life.”

Thank you.