

“One Wild and Precious Life”

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

January 26, 2020

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

Reflections from UCM members and friends across the lifespan

Reflection by Thomas Stimac (11AM)

I want to have a nice wife, live in Montpelier, and have kids. I also hope to stay in touch with my friends. When I grow up I want to teach people karate, and play basketball in the NBA. Also I would like to create cartoons.

Reflection by Ginny Brooke (9AM)

When I first read this poem and it's invitation to respond, I felt a deep sense of beauty, truth, and resonance. Well, that was quickly followed by a truckload of anxiety. As I approach 30, this question seems to be ever looming. In fact, all through my 20's it has been on the forefront of my mind. As more friends and relatives my age engage in milestones like getting full time jobs with benefits, buying houses, and having babies, the pressure feels real. I myself did a very adult thing and got married last fall. I couldn't help but reflect on this past decade of my life and some of the lessons I learned when considering this question. And, maybe not surprisingly, some of the answers I encountered had very little to do with status or materialism. Here are some thoughts on what intentions I have for this wild and precious life of mine:

-Be brave, be vulnerable, and be tender with myself and others. Practice this daily and imperfectly.

-Leave space for life to unfold. Filling time with worthy causes might sometimes be more of a distraction. Time with friends and family matters. Allow space to listen and observe.

-Be present. Notice and explore things like pain, sorrow, and guilt as well as things like joy and contentment. Notice and acknowledge when I choose to distract myself or get caught up in thoughts that cycle through like a loop.

-Validate. Acknowledge my thoughts, feelings, and actions as real and valid-extend this to others. Be curious.

-And last, laying in a field communing with crickets is very legitimate way to spend ones time on earth.

Reflection, “Be Fully Present; Love Universally,” by Laura Brooke (11AM)

When I read this poem by Mary Oliver and was asked to reflect on my life, I realized how complex yet simple this question is: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?". I found myself questioning my response and going back and forth about what to say. And then when it came down to the last day when I could send my response into Reverend Joan to then share with you all, I took a deep breath and read the poem again. A few lines stood out to me in this moment, when I was figuring out what to say: "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."

I recognize that I am part of a world that is bigger than me. There are grasshoppers, black bears, and fields of grass. How would I exist without these other precious beings? The description of the grasshopper and how different yet similar she is from the writer speaks to this idea of universality. I love this part of the poem for it speaks to noticing even the smallest of creatures, being in the present, and loving the differences. I must also communicate that part of me processing this poem and realizing the importance of the present (it's a gift) really came out when talking about it with my wife, Ginny.

We all go back and forth, left and right, up and down, about the answers to life's questions. What I take away from this exercise, however, is that I have the ability to be present in myself, appreciate my wild and precious life and realize that I am indeed a part of this world, full of other precious beings. I may not have the answers and that's okay. In fact, what would life be like if I believed I had all of the answers? How boring and self-centered. What's most important to me, at this juncture in my life, is that I know how to care, how to love myself and others and how to be loved in return.

Mary Oliver's poem and my reflection could act as my personal mantra. Thank you very much for asking me to participate as this may help motivate me and remind me to be my best self: to be fully present and love universally.

Reflection by Dustin Rand

As I realize I have likely spent more time here in this world than I have left, the question about what to do with my life gives me pause. Maybe I should have been reflecting more seriously on this earlier when the division of time was weighted more to the life not yet lived. Have I squandered $\frac{1}{2}$ or likely more of the life I have to live by not having a plan? I look back on my life so far and regret little of what I have done and how I have done it. Some tweaks here and there would definitely be in order, especially in my early days. However, have I done all I want to do?

I have lived a very opportunistic lifestyle for many years. Meaning I would seize every opportunity to do something fun, have an adventure, follow a passion (or a person) or sometimes just do what I thought was “right”. Some of these opportunities were hard-fought and some just fell in my lap for which I am grateful. They were not coordinated with some grand scheme or followed some particular pre-planned trajectory, but focused on just having and enjoying the experience of life to its’ fullest. They have made me a better person, given me my family and taken me around the world and for that, I am extremely happy.

However, over the past years I have come to realize that my life does not belong to me alone, but is tied tightly to my family, community and greater world we all live in. All that I do, or don’t do, has an impact on them in some way, however small, large, positive or negative that might be. How can I maximize the positive impact I make on those I see every day and those I may never meet? This is the question I feel I need to answer with what to do with in my one life. As I create opportunities and make my decisions in the future, this should guide my path.

If I were to leave this world today, would I be satisfied with all that I have done in my one wild and precious life? The simple answer is no. I suspect that answer will never change, regardless of when that day comes. However, if you were to ask me if I am satisfied in how I lived my life. I am confident today that my answer would be yes.

Reflection by Beth Damon

Last fall, at the beginning of the new year in the Jewish calendar and as I began my 60th year of life, I was given the honor of reading *The Summer Day*, by Mary Oliver, before several hundred people. Imagine my JOY at having the honor of REFLECTING on it here with you today, and it’s much less intimidating as you all feel like home to me.

Who am I at 59? My 50s have been all about RELATIONSHIP. Relationship with my grown children, with pain and my older body and soul, and with all of you.

I think of that grasshopper’s complicated eyes...Life sure is complicated! I think of the vase field of life and community, and YOU are that field I have been blessed to stroll through life with - deep, growing and verdant.

I am now an orphan and you have become my elders. We have a past together, and a present and a future.

My 4 wonderful children grew up in this church after I discovered Unitarian Universalism in 1995, when I wandered into this sanctuary seeking a spiritual home for my family. I was married here. My children all came of age and walked over the bridge with your embrace, into their adult lives. I grew up here TOO,

UCM has been my safety rope in the blizzard of this decade of whiteouts and ice storms, when I struggled to heal 4 herniated disks and depression, as I grieved the loss of loved ones, and as I supported my children through important life events.

During this decade I feel I have truly, for the first time in my life, been able to ask for support and receive it, and have both experienced and learned to offer deep empathy and kindness. I truly have learned to better understand what prayer means to me.

After 30 years of parenting, this decade finds me alone for the first time since I was 21, in the wild life I have built for myself and my children.

I have worked arduously at self-discovery and living an intentional life, and am at long last hearing the whisper of my own inner voice. I feel happy and excited about the possibilities ahead. I am learning to grow and teach myself, having spent decades teaching others.

After years of intense pain I'm incrementally better, and I can feel growth and healing happening within my body and inside of my heart. I now truly spend the majority of my time living an intentional life - with service at its core.

At UCM I feel accepted and embraced for who I am and that I can grow myself into an essential part of the world around me.

I believe in life-long-learning and I AM learning. I feel blessed to know all of you and I now am more able to appreciate myself for who I am and have yet to become.

As I wrap up this decade and enter my third chapter of life, I think of myself as a NEW church elder, with VERY BIG shoes to fill! My PLAN (and Mary was very clear about that word!) for my one precious life is to be here with all of you, and be there for you as well.

Thank you for sharing it with me, I am so grateful!

Reflection by Sandal Cate

(me) “Knock, knock.” (Mary) “Come in.” (me) “Excuse me, but I’m looking for the UU Guidance Office.” (Mary) “Well, you’ve come to the right place. I’m Mary Oliver, UU Guidance Counselor ‘from above’. What can I do for you?”

“Mary, it’s a thrill to meet you. I’m Sandal Cate, a member of this church. I saw the quote attributed to you on the Wayside Pulpit, and I thought I’d like to discuss my answer with someone here.”

“So, Sandal, ‘tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?’”

“Well, Mary, I actually brought some answers with me in the form of these items. This tee-shirt stands for my 32 years of teaching environmental and elementary education in the schools here. I was lucky to work on my master’s thesis in Hubbard Park where I probably hiked for 1000 hours or miles, whichever came sooner, with children of all ages. This hat from the North Branch Nature Center represents the final seven years of my professional career when I put another few hundred miles on my outdoor educator odometer. This hat says “Fox Run Farm” where I’ve lived with my husband and our extended family for almost 40 years, raising vegetables, a few small animals, bees and producing maple syrup. Oh, and I grabbed a souvenir from Nicaragua because I traveled there 5 different times to work with children in their rural schools through the Planting Hope program. I still stay in contact with my wonderful host family and miss them greatly.

So, Mary, I guess the “wild” element of my life has been my love of teaching nature to children, and the “precious” element has been my love of family and friends near and far and having the chance to bear witness to these loves right here in this church. I think my friends who attend here would probably agree with me.”

“Sandal, I can only guess that you have chosen to do what you love to do in your life and with wonderful children, colleagues, family, and nature woven all throughout. Lucky you. It has been a pleasure to hear your story. Now you need to attain your hidden goal of putting it into written stories. Go for it!”

“Thank you so much, Mary, for listening to me. Your words are an inspiration to those of us who love nature and our world.”

Reflection by Peter Thoms

Good morning. On this day, January 26, 1866, the first service was held in this sanctuary.

When Anne asked me to speak, I hesitated, not often using the word, “I.” On reflection, it’s an opportunity and privilege: to be with you and with this group of thoughtful speakers; and to wrestle with Mary Oliver’s command: “Tell me ...”

It’s kind to be offered equal speaking time - though the time ahead isn’t likely to be equal.

Looking at the order of service, and listed 8th in the batting order, I also come to the plate in the 8th inning, a metaphor fitting this time of life. With luck, there will be extra innings.

Accepting Oliver’s term, “plan to do,” there are three parts: adventures, questions, and people.

Adventures

With daughter Molly and Abby, visit my brother and his wife in Mexico, where they’ve lived since 2011

To go on a UU Living Legacy Pilgrimage to Birmingham, Selma, and Montgomery in late March (show page)

To consider running in this year’s Leaf Peepers Half Marathon; for the last time, I might be the youngest in our age group!

Questions to explore, echoing Oliver: “Who made the world? Who made the swan and the black bear?”

Having experienced it, why is there violence in human affairs, and war? And are we becoming less violent, as Steven Pinker argues ...? How “far” is a light year? What is consciousness? Where does music come from?

Can climate change be dealt with (show Harris’s book)? What costs and benefits are there in not eating meat and dairy? (T Cerulli’s book) And can our economy be made fairer and more sustainable, as Montpelier’s Eric Zencey advocated for, until he died last July?

And learn more about systemic thinking – as seen on the Oxford web site, The World in Data.

And, in the 8th inning, how to understand and face dying?

Hear poet Edna St. Vincent Millay: "I shall die, but that is all I will do for death."

And Emily Dickenson: "Because I could not stop for death, he kindly stopped for me."

Read "Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life," recommended by Bronwyn. Continue to relinquish, to let go of things. And will ponder M Oliver's other question in the poem: "Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?"

People

Walking with Molly – as she embraces a fine Jesuit law school in Boston; and with Abby, who, more than anyone I know, embraces Bryan Stevenson's counsel: to get proximate to people who are suffering and to stay hopeful.

To explore family history – here is our grandmother's Manhattan birth record, 1878.

Last - to be a friend to those from grammar school to UCM.

To close – from Mary Oliver's 1983 poem, Blackwater Woods:

To live in this world
you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it
against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.
Thank you for listening.