

On the first Sunday of January, Winchester Unitarian Society members, representing three generations, respond to the poet Mary Oliver's question "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" This year, on January 5th, 2020, Elizabeth Sharon, Matthew Bronski and John Russell offered their reflections:

Elizabeth Sharon

Good morning everyone. My name is Elizabeth and I am a senior at Winchester High School. Today I will be speaking about my plans for my one wild and precious life. No pressure.

I grew up in this church. I was dedicated right over there and I attended every Sunday morning service and religious education class. As I got older, I moved on to OWL where I learned about birth through interpretive dance. Now I'm a part of WUSYG and I will be going on my fourth service trip this spring. I've also been a religious education teacher for the last two years. I guess that's a lot of things but looking back at it, it all flew by. It's hard to imagine this amazing community not being in my life when I go off to college next year.

Before I get ahead of myself let's rewind to the young child going to every Sunday service. I'm fortunate to have had a great childhood. It consisted of dancing, swimming, playing basketball, acting, having my sister put eyeliner on me so I scratch my cornea and have to wear an eyepatch to school for three days and so many other things. I also formed unbreakable bonds with both my sisters, I hope. Even though I might have stolen their clothes one too many times.

Besides that, I don't know how to describe growing up because it's a very curious thing. So many memories, first experiences, lessons not to mention hormones all jam-packed into about ten or so years. I guess what I'm wondering is how did I find who I am? (even though I am very much still doing that). Because what makes me me is what will guide my future. A quote from one of my favorite books goes, "Or maybe a person is just made up of a lot of people. Maybe we're accumulating these new selves all the time. Hauling them in as we make choices, good and bad, as we screw up, step up, fall apart, fall in love, as we grieve, grow, retreat from the world, dive into the world, as we make things, as we break things. Each new self standing on the last one's shoulders until we're these wobbly people poles".

I found I have many different people on my wobbly people pole. In a sense that because I was given the opportunity to explore as a child I have found many different passions of mine. I enjoy the outdoors. I discovered this on our many family hiking trips over the years. Yes, we did climb Mount Washington in a blizzard. No, I don't know why. I've also fallen in love with theater. I've been acting since I was a child at theater camps and in high school I've done three plays and have absolutely loved all of them. I also have been playing the trumpet for eight years and I'm thankful for the lessons I've learned through it and the deeper appreciation for the music I have because of it. Also with WUSYG I've developed a passion for community service. The service trips are such a meaningful experience for me. Lastly, I've become quite the math geek as my mom would call me. I've also learned what I don't like along the way. For example, I'm really bad at basketball and I don't recommend working at Dunkin Donuts.

So with all these different interests how do I possibly do all of them while also putting a roof over my head. In a way, I'm just like every adult asking the question what are you gonna do with your life, no offense to adults. With college approaching, this decision is suddenly very real. It's no longer a child daydreaming of becoming a vet. I am finally on the brink of being the master of my fate.

I try not to stress about it too much. But in reality, there are an infinite number of paths I could take. What should guide me in making these choices? Myself. I want to purposefully make a life that I want to live, filled with the things I enjoy. I want to someday hike the Appalachian Trail solo. I want to study theater in college and try to take it as far as I can. Maybe I will play the trumpet in college or maybe I will learn a new instrument. I want to make sure I get involved with service in my community and continue spreading the message of not eating meat and saving our planet. I also might become a math teacher because I love math and I love kids. I also want my life to be full of other things I enjoy like concerts, clothes, food, reading, the beach, meeting new people and traveling. This is very much a luxury I have, to have the means to create the life I want. It is also very uncertain and I'm ok with that because I never really think that far forward. Today I'm mostly concerned with my next meal, my math homework and getting my mouthguard for my jaw problem.

I also want to touch more on my personal or spiritual plans for my life, I mean we are in a church. The wobbly people pole is also a metaphor for how many different personalities, ideas and morals I have gathered over the years. These are a few I want to keep in the future.

1. Forgive yourself for the mistakes you have made or things you should have done but didn't. I sometimes find myself caught up in little things that don't matter. Instead I want to consciously remain in the present.

2. Don't care what people think too much. I find that social media is a great thing if you want to be constantly comparing yourself to others. Instead I want to compare myself to who I was yesterday and who someone else is today.

3. Owning stuff is unimportant compared to giving stuff. The most valuable things are the people we love.

4. Assume that every person has something new to share with you.

I'd never thought I'd be 18 but here I am. So I know someday I'll be a lot older than I am now. And even though that seems far away I know once it comes it'll feel like I got there in a blink of an eye. When I'm there I wanna look back knowing I tried my best. Thank you so much!

Matthew Bronski

Two years ago, I turned 52 years old. I marked the occasion by noting that – at least based on typical life expectancies - I had just entered the final third of my life

I now realize that at each of these three stages of my life, I've had a very different take on Mary Oliver's big question:

In the first Stage, under 26, my take on the big question was very practical and mostly vocational –

- Where do I want to go to college?
- What do I want to study?
- What do I want to do for a living?

- Where do I want to work ?

Looking back on it now, I realize that was all about me, me, me.

By the time I was 30 years old, I had answered all those first stage questions, and Erin and I had gotten engaged. An older mentor told me that the biggest adjustment for most young people when they get married is that they cease to become the most important person in their own life. I quickly found this to be true. When Caroline came along, and the health and self-sufficiency of my parents declined, I became the third, fourth, and then fifth most important person in my life. In that middle third of my life, my take on the big question, and my focus clearly shifted from taking care of myself to taking care of my loved ones: both younger and older.

About 10 years ago, Erin and I and our newborn baby daughter had a chance to spend a year in Rome on an historic preservation fellowship. That year in Italy was a completely transformative experience in many ways, but most of all in a way that I was not expecting at all, which was the way I was treated as a complete stranger and foreigner who barely spoke their language.

Being able to do my independent preservation research project in Rome COMPLETELY depended on me getting on to the scaffolding of buildings under restoration. My official access requests on official letterhead to faceless official institutions invariably elicited official written responses of “NO”. However, I realized that when I actually met a person who was working on a restoration site and personally asked for their help, they invariably said yes and then bent over backwards to help me. This happened time and again, as literally dozens of strangers helped me gain the access to their restoration sites over the course of the year.

Being out and about with baby Caroline for much of every day, Erin and I quickly became adept at changing her diaper almost anywhere. One cold rainy day in the dead of winter, we started changing Caroline’s diaper on a wet stone bench on a quiet side street. Two women in a nearby shop saw us, ran out and beckoned us inside to change her diaper in their warm dry clothing shop. They went so far as to offer a counter piled with expensive cashmere sweaters as a suitably cozy place

to lay her and change her diaper. We politely used their floor instead, telling them that would better if there were "*un po' incidente*" - a little accident...

On the morning of Christmas eve, I went into our favorite bread bakery to get several loaves, only to see it absolutely mobbed with people, all shouting, waving their hands and pushing forward trying to work their way to the front to get the clerk's attention. I stood frozen at the very back of the room, far from the counter and the madness of the crowd. I did not want to go into the jostling crowd with Caroline strapped to my chest, and as I stood in the back debating my options, I looked up and saw the young woman behind the counter, ignoring the people wildly gesticulating in front of her, and pointing to me in the back of the room.

Me (looking around): "Me?"

Her, (nodding) "yes, you!"

She motioned me forward and slid around to the less densely occupied end of the counter to make it easier for me to meet her and order my bread. I thanked her profusely and left with a backpack full of bread.

My final stop at dusk on Christmas eve was our favorite patisserie, where I occasionally stopped to buy a few cookies and chat with the elderly owner Vera. I chatted with Vera in my broken Italian, and mentioned that my wife's entire family was here visiting us for Christmas. I picked out a cake, and she pulled it from the case and started to box it as we chatted. I mentioned that it was a birthday cake for my wife's sister, who was born on Christmas day, and then Vera stopped dead in her tracks and asked "Wait, this cake is for tomorrow?" I said "yes", and she promptly put it back in the case, and said "But this cake won't be fresh tomorrow – I made it today. Come back tomorrow morning around 9, and I will make a fresh cake early tomorrow morning and have it all ready for you." And I said "But tomorrow is Christmas Day – are you open?" to which she responded "*Sono aperto per TE*" "I'm open for YOU."

In all these cases and many more, person after person went out of their way to help ME, a virtual stranger, and immigrant who barely spoke their language. To them, there was nothing extraordinary about this – this is simply how they live. That was truly the most transformative aspect of that remarkable year for me. It

made me decide THAT is the kind of community that I want to be a part of, and THAT is the kind of person I want to be, in this the final third of my life. That is what inspired me, upon returning to the States, to seek out a community of caring, giving people to become a part of, and that is what led me to find this place, this community, you.

In retrospect, I find it funny that although I was born, raised, and lived most of my life in Greater Boston, epicenter of Unitarian Universalism, I really didn't know anything about the Unitarian Universalism, until as a 40-something year old, I spent a year living 4,000 miles away, with a bunch of died-in-the-wool Roman Catholic Italians, who had absolutely no idea what Unitarian Universalism is, but who taught me, by their example what I now consider to be "UU Values".

So in summary,

- in the first third of my life, my take on Mary Oliver's big question was what I wanted to do with myself
- In the middle third of my life, my focus shifted to helping my loved ones
- In this the final third of my life, following the example of Italian strangers who became my friends, and the example of you, this community, I am trying to live my one precious life helping not only my loved ones, but also strangers, who I now know are really just friends I haven't yet met.

John Russell

So, Mary Oliver, you'd like to know what I plan to do with the rest of my one wild and precious life.

Mary, do you understand that I am no longer a young man; that I've earned my degrees, served my hitch in the Navy, married a beautiful woman, worked with her to raise a family, pursued a fulfilling career in academia, contributed to the life of this church, and enjoyed twenty-five years of busy, stress-free retirement? Now you come along and say, "That's cool, John, but what are you going to do next?" Talk about chutzpah! Mary, I've already experienced every major phase of life—except departure. And, if it's all right with you, I'd like to postpone that. For as long as possible.

I wish you'd come directly to me with your question. I could have suggested, politely, that you please ask someone else. But you couldn't come. You sent Reverend Heather, instead. Reverend Heather is my minister. You know very well; one does not say no to his minister.

So, here I am; obliged to give your question a shot.

But before I do; a small edit: Strike the word "wild." Wild ceased being permissible behavior when our first child was born. Fatherhood is serious business. Mix it with wild and someone's going to get hurt. Besides, at this point, my time for wild is long past. Let's just limit ourselves to precious.

Those of you, sitting in this sanctuary who have reached your seventh decade or, worse yet, your eighth, are fully aware of just how precious life is. And you know that it becomes increasingly so with each succeeding year.

With that in mind, Mary, here's the plan for the rest of my increasingly precious life. The plan is compact. It comes in two parts.

Part One: Master and practice the art of being ancient but still useful. After all, why stay around if one is no longer at least a tiny bit useful?

Now, we may have to bend the concept a little. For old folk, "being useful" may involve nothing more than keeping quiet and staying out of the way of young people--like Betsy Bowles and James Pidacks—who are currently in charge. On the other hand, maybe that's not what "useful" will mean. We shall see.

Part Two: Last August, with great joy and gratitude, Maggie and I marked two dandy milestones: Our sixtieth wedding anniversary and fifty years of membership in this Society. Alas, behind those two big, happy numbers lurks a not-so-happy message: The time is growing short.

So, Mary, Part 2 of the plan is my promise to savor every passing day—with Maggie, with my children and their families, and with all of you, my dear friends at this church.

That's all there is to the plan, Mary. Part One: Stay useful. Part Two: Savor each remaining day.

Now, Mary Oliver, inspired poet: Elizabeth, Matthew, and I have answered your question. What a shame that you're not here this morning to tell us your answer.