



## Your One Wild and Precious Life

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From 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 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?

Do you still ask that question? I don't mean in the sense that it is a nagging, whispered voice, easy to block out with any one of a number of diversions and distractions that the world seems increasingly full of. I mean in the sense of really struggling with the question, as if there might be an answer.

*Revisiting it from time to time, at different stages of our lives.*

“What’s my job on the planet?” Jon Kabat-Zinn posed the question in his meditation manual, *Wherever You Go, There You Are*. (Hyperion) If we don’t ask the question, over and over again, he says, “. . . we may wind up doing somebody else’s job and not even know it. And what’s more, that somebody else might be a figment of our own imagination . . . !”

What is the good life? If I could choose a path now, in which direction would I head? What is my yearning? What do I truly love?

“Rabbi Hanokh told of how, for a year, he yearned to go to his rebbe, Simha Bunam, and talk. But whenever he came in his master's presence, he was overcome with embarrassment. Finally it happened that one day he was hiding in the field behind Bunam's home, confused, terrified, weeping. Bunam noticed him off in the distance, went to the door, and motioned to him to come inside. ‘Why are you crying Hanokh?’ asked the rebbe. Whereupon Hanokh blurted out, ‘I am alive; I have arms and legs, eyes and ears; but I don’t know why I have been created!’ ‘Dummy,’ replied Bunam, ‘I don't know why I have been created either. C'mon, let’s have dinner together!’”  
(Lawrence Kushner, *God was in This Place and I, i Did Not Know*)

Who am I? Why am I here? These are not just the questions of adolescents, or holy fools. We never stop asking. But the fervor dies down perhaps. Or perhaps we stop asking in the right place. We seek the answer from outside ourselves. We get caught up on the treadmill, expecting the answer from a degree, or another degree, or a relationship, or a new job, or the latest self-help book.

Where is the answer to be found? In Genesis there is the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel. You may vaguely remember it

Everett Fox, tells it in *The Five Books of Moses*. It is an odd little story, eight lines inserted into a larger one. A remnant, perhaps, of an earlier legend.

The larger story sounds like a mystical soap opera. When we last left Jacob, he had cheated his twin brother Esau out of his inheritance, Esau had threatened to kill Jacob. Their mother Rebekah sends Jacob far away to live with an uncle. On his way, he has his *Jacob's ladder* vision, of angels ascending and descending.

Later, Jacob falls in love with one woman, is tricked into marrying someone else, finally marries his true love, becomes a very rich man.

After many years, God tells Jacob it's time to return to his homeland. He makes the journey. He's still afraid of Esau, so to butter him up he sends servants ahead, bearing gifts in droves, instructing them to put a space before each drove, so over the course of the day Esau receives herds of goats, then ewes, then donkeys, cows, bulls, camels, etc. I imagine them, coming over the dusty plain, presenting their riches, saying that Jacob is coming soon.

On the night before the meeting with Esau, facing either death or reconciliation, Jacob has another divine encounter. In Everett Fox's translation it reads:

And Yaakov was left alone—

Now a man wrestled with him until the coming of dawn.

When he saw that he could not prevail against Jacob,

he touched the socket of his thigh;

the socket of Yaakov's thigh had been dislocated as he wrestled  
with him.

then the man said:

Let me go,

for dawn has come up!

But Jacob said:

*I will not let you go unless you bless me.*

He said to him:

What is your name?  
 Then he said:  
 Not as Yaakov/Heel-Sneak shall your name be henceforth  
     uttered,  
 but rather as Yisrael/God-Fighter,  
 for you have fought with God and men  
 and have prevailed. (Genesis 32: 25-29, Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*)

The image: on a dark night, alone, crossing a river, one wrestles. He fights until the dawn, is wounded, and is blessed with a new name. His former name, Jacob, or Yaakov, is variously translated as thief, or fraud. Literally it means “heel,” for he had been born grasping the heel of his twin brother Esau. “Heel-Sneak” is Fox’s translation. Through struggle, he finds his true name. Israel. Contends with God.

There are many ways to interpret scripture. One might approach this story in a *literal* way, that the protagonist wrestled with a mysterious stranger. One might approach it in a *mystical* way, that he grappled with a divine spirit. Or one might understand *psycho-spiritually*, as Carl Jung might, as the story of an inner struggle. *Fraud? Or Contends with God?* It can be seen as a striving to gain a sense of one’s essential nature.

This inner nature, or essence, is a major focus of Jean Houston, a psychologist and author. “By ‘essence,’” she says, “I mean that part of our nature we recognize as the god in hiding, the source quality or soul quality that links us to our highest becoming. . . . (Shirley Fisher, quoted in Jean Houston, “Calling Our Spirits Home”, *Noetic Sciences Review*)

Some people seem to be in touch with this inner sense she says, naming Gandhi, Emily Dickenson, Helen Keller, Buddha, and Jesus as examples. She tells a story about Margaret Mead. “She used to live with us from time to time, so I can tell this story,” she says. “I passed by her room one morning and I heard her stretch and say ‘Thank God, I’m Margaret Mead!’ Now this wasn’t ego, not at all — this was utter celebration. Try it with your own name: ‘Thank God, I’m . . . .’” (Houston)

Can you do this? Does it feel funny? When I do it I feel a bit like Rabbi Hanokh: sorrow, defiance, fear, joy. It isn't comfortable. Perhaps I'm still struggling with that angel.

We aren’t taught much about going within, to contend with God, to open ourselves to the unfolding of our true nature.

My late colleague Kit Howell once spoke of what dying of lung cancer has taught him. “I don’t have time for artifice, for lying or pretending. My task is to find that place within myself and live out of the most genuine place possible at every moment.” For him, life was literally too short to play games.

I hear this, but my death is, mostly, an abstraction.

Henry David Thoreau wrote, “I wish to learn what life has to teach, and not, when I come to die, discover that I have not lived. I do not wish to live what is not life, living is so dear.”

I know this, but it is so hard to live it.

For me, I forget too easily. This is why I meditate.  
Not just to discover why I'm here, but also to *be fully* here.

Jon Kabat-Zinn asks, “. . . doesn't it make sense  
to look around a bit from time to time  
so that you are more in touch with  
what is happening now,  
so that you can take your inner  
and outer bearings  
and perceive with clarity  
the path that you are actually on  
and the direction in which you are going?  
If you do so, maybe you will be in a  
better position to chart a course for yourself  
that is truer to your inner being—  
a soul path, a  
path with heart,  
your path with a capital P.  
If not, the sheer momentum of your unconsciousness  
in *this* moment just colors the *next* moment.  
The days, months, and years quickly go by—  
unnoticed, unused, unappreciated.” (Zinn p *xvi*)

Mindfulness meditation is one way of doing this. It doesn't require going off to a monastery, nor an investment in special clothing, nor a familiarity with esoteric literature. You don't have to become a Buddhist, though the practice comes out of Buddhism. It is merely a means of being more present, more alive, in the here and now. It is an aid to paying attention.

As Zinn says, “Mindfulness provides a simple but powerful route for getting ourselves unstuck, back into touch with our own wisdom and vitality. It is a way to take charge of the direction and quality of our own lives, including our relationships within the family, our relationship to work and to the larger world and planet, and most fundamentally, our relationship with our-self as a person. The key to this path, which lies at the root of Buddhism, Taoism, and yoga, and which we also find in the works of people like Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, and in Native American wisdom, is an appreciation for the present moment and the cultivation of an intimate relationship with it through a continual attending to it with care and discernment. It is the direct opposite of taking life for granted.”

You can learn about this technique through the books of Zinn, or Stephen Levine, Joseph Goldstein, Tich Naht Hanh or Mary Sullivan.

Zinn offers several exercises in his book, like this one:

"Try: Stopping, sitting down, and becoming aware of your breathing once in a while throughout the day. It can be for five minutes, or even five seconds. Let go into full

acceptance of the present moment, including how you are feeling and what you perceive to be happening. For these moments, don't try to change anything at all, just breathe and let go. Breathe and let be. Die to having to have anything be different in this moment; in your mind and in your heart, give yourself permission to allow this moment to be exactly as it is, and allow yourself to be exactly as you are. Then, when you're ready, move in the direction your heart tells you to go, mindfully and with resolution."

This is the foundation of our meditation during the service.

To come fully into this place,  
 into the presence of one another,  
 into the presence of the holy.  
 To be in *this* holy moment.

Of course, it doesn't have to be this particular discipline. One can undertake other types of meditation, or prayer, reading scripture, (among which I include overtly religious writings as well as literature and poetry), some martial arts like Tai Chi, or writing in a journal, or even a taking a regular walk or a bubble bath—mindfully of course!

*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 . . .*

What it requires is that we take time for ourselves. That we take a break from everything else to come to our senses—back to a sense of *ourselves*. That we affirm, on a regular basis, who we are and what we care about. Such a practice can lead us to celebrate ourselves, to more fully appreciate this sacred existence. Maybe the cycle goes,  
*what* will I do,  
 to— *how* do I do it,  
 to— what have I *done*,  
 to— saying good-bye  
 to this wild and precious life.

There is a Zen story about the monk Banzan. He was walking through a market one day and overheard a conversation between a butcher and a customer. "Give me the best piece of meat you have," said the customer. "Everything in my shop is the best," replied the butcher. "You cannot find here any piece of meat that is not the best." At these words Banzan became enlightened.

In this life we have been loaned or gifted with, *everything* is the best. The best is not to be found in some future time, but in this time. This life, wild and precious. May we learn to live it fully, and love it with all our hearts.

AMEN