

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
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Your Wild and Precious Life

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

What is it we might be doing – could be, should be doing? Let’s start with this: A sign on the wall of a retreat center says,

Things to do today:

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

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I’ve been trying to figure out what it is I find distasteful – vaguely offensive, even – about the idea of a bucket list. This is as far as I’ve gotten: it feels like a shopping list. We stride purposefully through the sprawling mall of life, list in hand, and with each new acquisition – that wild animal to photograph, that exotic sunset to take in, that plane to jump out of – another item on our list can be crossed off. Been there, done that – check! Check, check, check ... and then, when the bucket-list bucket is empty, we kick the bucket.

Is that any way to live?

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

In the late 1980s, my Provincetown parishioner, whom I will call Antonio, was diagnosed with AIDS – at the time, a death sentence.

Antonio had always wanted to go to Italy, to see the cathedrals, great art, ancient cities and beautiful countryside; to meet his extended family and eat wonderful food. With about three months to live, he sold everything he had, quit his job, gave up his apartment, said goodbye to all his friends, and bought a one-way plane ticket to Rome.

When he arrived, things got complicated. He became very sick, and went to the hospital. Somehow, when he disclosed that he had the virus, he ended up in jail. An Italian prison had not been on his bucket list, nor had using his short life's savings to get out of jail. A friend flew over to bring him home to die.

And then, somehow, Antonio's condition improved. It looked as though he wouldn't die immediately after all. This wasn't how it was supposed to happen.

For years, defying all odds, he stayed just ahead of the treatment options that bought him more time. But with his last, great dream in tatters, suspended between living and dying, he had no idea how to live. From the moment of his incarceration, onward, he was, in every sense of the word, utterly destitute.

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

I have nothing bad to say about stretching and opening our minds to the unfamiliar, taking the leap into new experiences, testing the limits of our flexibility against unpredictability. Life is a movable feast! But novelty can be a drug – being addicted to the next best thing is as much an addiction as our slavish duty to deeply-ingrained habits. And – even more important – doing more is not the only way to spend our time well.

There must be a middle ground between squandering our lives, living in a stupor of technology or alcohol or food or slothfulness with little to show in the way of meaningful relationships ... and chasing the often-elusive next best thing, charging through the mall of life.

What does it mean to waste time, or, worse, to kill time?

Don was another parishioner living with AIDS, an artist and a gentleman. Somewhere, there is a picture of us, taken from behind: we are sitting on his deck, looking out over Provincetown bay, our clasped hands suspended between two Adirondack chairs. The virus had gone to his brain, and his deep brown eyes hollowed-out. The photo was taken the day Don stopped speaking.

So we sat holding hands, and we both knew it wouldn't be long, now, before I'd be scattering his ashes into a sunset, and we wept, both shattered and grateful. In that late afternoon, there was so much that remained undone, but, far more important, there was the beauty of all that we had shared – the chance to have known art and music and a life free of drugs and alcohol, a life of friends and spiritual community.

Don was dead within the week. Our time together on the deck wasn't on anyone's "bucket list." But it had been steeped in appreciation against a glorious backdrop, and filled with love. Was it wasted?

French Renaissance luminary Michel Montaigne wrote that we are fools if we think that days without achievement are without value. "What!" he writes. "Have you not *lived*? That is not only the fundamental, but the most noble of your occupations.... Have you been able to reflect on your life...? Then you have performed the greatest work of all.... Our great and glorious masterpiece is to live...."¹

At the height of the AIDS crisis, some people disappeared without warning. Arlington Street's late Dick Pooler's lover, Frank, was diagnosed on a Friday afternoon and was dead by Sunday. The organist who played for my ordination received his diagnosis, locked himself into his room, and ended his life. What does death have to say to us, the living, the well?

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

First, let's be certain to say, "I love you." This may be the last time, the only chance we have. *I love you!*

And second, let's come into the present. It is far less important to have goals – crossing items off that shopping list – than to *savor* the journey.

Savor. Relish. Breathe in; breathe out. And I want to lift up a little paradox. Just this: the attempt to squeeze as much intensity as possible from every living moment often results in a life that is empty, not full.

Israeli-American psychologist and 2002 Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman distinguishes between what he calls our two selves. One is the

¹ Michel de Montaigne, 'On experience,' *Essays*, pp. 396-397; italics mine

experiencing or intuitive self. It exists only in the moment. The other is the remembering or reflective self. Daniel Kahneman asks, Which self should we put first; which is more important? The experiencing self is only about right now, all feelings. The remembering self makes sense of it all, and helps us construct the narrative of what matters.

As is so often the case, I'm voting both/and. Each of us is, after all, just one self – not two – but we contain both the capacity to experience – to drop into our senses, to feel, and, at best, to open our minds, hearts, and hands – *and* the capacity to remember and reflect, and so to make a life of meaning, a life worth living.

There is no time like the present! We are joined at the heart.

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

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Not long after his lover, Rogers Baker, was diagnosed with the virus, Preston Babbitt stood up during worship in the Provincetown Meeting House and shared an insight that marked a turning point in how we, as a spiritual community, lived with AIDS. Preston said, Roger and I had a lot of big ideas and plans. That's good; it's been wonderful to dream together. But the horizon is moving in. So now, it's all about moments – remembering special times, and, as much as possible, creating new ones, despite the circumstances. It can't be all sad – that's no way to die, and no way to live.

And so the pall lifted a little, and we began to plan parties – even when the guys had to be carried in, and lay on pallets in the middle of the dance floor – and we worked to create a last few happy memories, and to mix laughter into our tears.

As Rogers sickened and weakened, he had exactly one day in which he was well enough to get up and about. It was a little shocking to run into him on Commercial Street, bundled up despite the temperate weather, his impossibly gaunt, translucent face shrouded by a hood. But he was lit from within. And what was he doing – what was he doing, as it turns out, with his final day out among the living?

He was buying presents.

Weighted down with purchases, his thin wrists braceleted with the handles of multiple shopping bags, he was radiant with the pleasure of remembering all those whom he loved, and who loved him.

After he died, we sat together and received these last gifts with the memory of the gratitude and joy with which he had thought of us – in the face of anger and bitterness, gratitude; in the face of joylessness; joy.

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

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Beloved spiritual companions,

Things to do today:

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

There's no time like the present!

“Our great and glorious masterpiece” is all about
moments; gratitude; joy.

Experiencing self, remembering self:

May we hold hands, beyond words,
and savor all the beauty we share.

May we be joined at the heart.

May we say, I love you.

I love you!

Amen.