

## Time of Your Life

At the end of 2014, I'd been retired for a year and a half. I've been paying close attention to my life, the choices I've made and those to come. I want to remember to live every day as if it was my last. One day, it will be.

Mary Oliver's lines speak to me.

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

and

"When it's over ...

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world."

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In September, 2007, my wife, Kathy, and I were going to see my brother, Mike, and his wife, Char, in The Hague, The Netherlands for an early celebration of my birthday - Mike's treat on frequent-flyer miles. My 60<sup>th</sup>, a *big round number*, gave me pause. Other factors made me think about my life: married 31 years, a rare two-week vacation from my hectic job at Lawrence Livermore lab, and our first trip to Europe. I would retire from University of California (UC), which managed the lab, on our trip, but I planned to work for the lab's new management for three more years. It turned out to be five. On the trip, I'd wanted to step back from workaday routines, get perspective, consider transition to life after retirement - what I wanted then.

On my last day before the trip, John Harri caught me. He said he was calling it quits on Friday, his last day working part time as a retiree. I'd worked for John several

different times since we met in 1986. He'd been one of my favorite bosses. A few years ago, he'd had a heart attack.

John said, "I've got something for you – your ten-year UC service pin."

We laughed. I'd been working at the lab over 27 years.

"John, was there something that prompted you to quit?"

John took a tape measure out of the desk drawer and hooked it in the white board tray on the far wall. He pulled the tape across the room to where we stood and pointed to the 80-inch mark. "I might live to be this old." He pointed at the 69-inch mark on the tape. "I'm 69 now." John looked at the tape and then at me. "It just seems like it's time."

I looked too. I was nearly 60, far enough along the tape that John's point resonated with me. Our age on the tape was a graphic physical representation of how much of our life we'd lived. The distance to any reasonable estimate of how long we'd live was much shorter.

I told John of Thomas McGuane's line, "...As they say in South America, everyone knows that they are going to die; yet nobody believes it. Human lapses of this kind enable us to fish, fornicate, overeat, and bet on the horses..."

I said good-bye to John and finished up the afternoon at work. Kathy and I headed for The Netherlands.

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In the Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*, someone is asked, "What is the most wondrous thing in the entire universe?" The reply is, "The most wondrous thing in the entire universe is that all around us people are dying and we don't believe it will happen

to us.” Meditation teachers Salsburg and Goldstein, write, “It’s as though there’s this big surprise for us at the end of our lives.”

In his old book, *Who Dies*, Stephen Levine, a veteran of assisting at many hospice deaths, reminds us that 250,000 people die every day.

Yeats said, “We are fastened to a dying animal.” To be alive, in our bodies, implies physical suffering, inevitable decay, aging, sickness, and death – no matter what we want.

I wanted to remember all this - not to be morbid, but to remember to live every day fully, as if it was my last.

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I’ve stepped into this next phase, knowing life is short, losses and diminishment are inevitable, and we die. When we took that trip in 2007, I’d been meditating in the mornings for over a decade. We’d been in Holland a few days, when I’d settled in to meditate for 20 minutes, to pay attention to breath and the fullness of being in the body, and note what arises. Thoughts of work issues, projects, and daily concerns bubbled up and faded away. Then I thought, *What if I wasn’t going back to work? What do I really want to do?* I let the question just be there – watching what came. Two weeks off, with Kathy, offered a preview of the road ahead.

Barbara Sher’s, *Live The Life You Love*, offers the exercise of remembering what we’ve enjoyed doing, what we’ve ever loved, and imagining if we took these to the limit and turned them into a fantasy career profession, where would we wind up, what would our life be like? Her premise is what you love is what you are gifted at, but that the most important parts of ourselves can’t show up until after we have attained what we want.

Once those needs are met – even in this fantasy exercise – we are free to create dreams based on who we really are.

I explored what I'd enjoyed doing and how it might inform what I wanted to do after my career at the lab. When I was real busy there, I had little time for anything but work. However, I had identified a handful of things I wanted to do that I slipped into my life like slivers, long thin bright wedges. With the limited time I had, I could still do them a little bit. I looked forward to sliding up the wedges and spending more time on these activities as I transitioned to retirement.

In their *Utne Reader* article, Utne and Leider discuss mentoring, wisdom, and why boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) can still save the world. What must the boomers do to prepare themselves for service?... The idea is to help people find ways to identify what their unique gift is ... to give to the world ... to connect with opportunities to give their gift. Leider defines *calling* as the inner urge to give your gifts away ... boomers are interested in working or serving in some capacity as long as they are healthy and capable of sustaining their lives.

Most mornings, before I meditate, I look at the photos in the room and am grateful for the families Kathy and I came from, the gift of our lives and our siblings our parents gave us. I'm grateful Kathy chose me, for our life together, and for our young adult children. I'm grateful for the health, comfort, and safety of our lives. I'm grateful for the career I've had at the lab, a generous pension from UC; an opportunity to work with extremely talented people, supporting fusion ignition in the laboratory on the National Ignition Facility (NIF) - the biggest project ever at the lab, perhaps the Manhattan Project of our era.

Busy as I was while working at the lab, I still cultivated the things I cared about – that I had slipped into my life like thin wedges. Since I’ve retired, I’ve continued to make choices about where to put my time and energy. I give blood as often as I can and love to do it – it makes me feel connected to the community of life we all share.

I’m interested in sustainable development. I’ve increased my volunteering with Engineers Without Borders. I’m continuing to work on Belize Open Source – Sustainable Development, a non-profit land-based learning center and working farm on 40 acres in Belize. I’m an organizer with PublicLab, doing aerial photomapping with kites and balloons, working with their other citizen science tools, and sharing the results in research notes.

I write – memoir and travel pieces, a true novel and longer memoir in progress. I’m learning to sketch and draw. I continue to study Spanish.

I’m grateful for all those who have helped me. I’m grateful for the totality of experience that has brought me to the present moment.

I practice mindfulness. I joke that I’m doomed, or blessed, with no alternative but to practice. Meditation teacher Sylvia Boorstein reminds us, “ ... I start over. That’s the practice for you as well. Plan to be starting over, all the time. ... Strive on with diligence... Move with sureness into the future...”

On Tuesday, after Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. observance day, when I opened my daily planner at work, the quote was:

Find out what you love. Do it because you love it.

Stick with it. Start now.

-- Barbara Sher

Synchronicity, serendipity, or just coincidence? I don't know, but it got my attention. The line from Green Day's song ran through my mind, "... It's something unpredictable, but in the end it's right. I hope you had the time of your life."

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