

you must change your life! you must
change your life? **YOU** must change your
life. you must change your life! you must
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change your life. **sara lynne puotinen**

**YOU MUST
CHANGE
YOUR LIFE.**

sara lynne puotinen

you must change your life!
you must change your life?
you must change your life.
you change, must your life?
must your life change you?
“you must change”—your life
“your life must change”—you

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YOU MUST CHANGE YOUR LIFE

for Mary Oliver

It could be something.

It could be everything.

It could be what Rilke meant, when he wrote:

You must change your life.

The first time I read the lines
concluding Mary Oliver's invitation
to witness some musical goldfinches
I utter a silent yes!

You must change your life has power
inspiring you to want to be better
to notice those goldfinches singing
in a thistle-filled field.

The second time I read the lines
I study the "It" that could be something
or everything or what Rilke meant.
What is It? The goldfinches? Their musical battle?
Paying attention to their ridiculous performance?
Believing birds as they celebrate
being alive in a broken world?

The third time I read the lines
I've found where Rilke writes
about changing your life and I try
to understand how his headless torso
shining smiling seeing into me works
with Oliver's non-competitive goldfinches
singing for singing's sake

while hanging on-
to the feeling of yes! *you must change your life* creates.

But it's hard. Yes! has turned
to What? and How? and Why
changing my life is something I must do. And When
changing my life is worthy of the line
you must change your life. And from Where the determination comes to
be hailed with you must and respond with I will!

To stop all these questions
I go out for a run above the Mississippi River
where no birds are battling
but some are honking others cawing
and one group trilling rapidly
up in the trees. I listen
ranking them from most
annoying to least and decide
these birds are not going to change my life—
at least not in the way Oliver
or Rilke or my yes! imagines they should.

But I can't stop thinking about changing
my life and how it happens.
I'm struggling with the problem
of will and desire. What if those aren't enough
to make a change or
to hear that call telling you change is needed?
I'm troubled by the image of a Moment:
the sky opening up
the birds starting to sing
the sun shining down
illuminating the path

leading to transformation.

Even if this happens—does it ever happen?—
what gets us past that moment and onto the path?
Who is to say we don't forget the next day
or the next hour or the next minute
we're supposed to be changing our lives?
By the time we remember
the birds have flown away
musical battle finished
inspiration over
reason to change forgotten.

And anyway who cares
about the battling birds?
What about the light?
Sometimes the sunlight blinds me
as I'm running up the hill
untethering me from the path.
Sometimes it casts a shadow,
providing a running partner
to keep me company.
Sometimes it shines on the river.
Oh—Is there anything more beautiful
than shimmering sparkling water?
Each wave a ripple of white gold
never singing *you must change your life*
but whispering stay in this moment.
Don't change. The way the light sits
on the surface? Remember it.
Keep it close forever.

Listening to the light I feel Yes!
creeping back in and I am satisfied.

But the moment passes
the light shifts
you must change your life becomes
must you change your life? then
you change, must your life? and
I've lost It (whatever *it* is).

Maybe It got tired of running with me
and decided to take
the old stone steps that
wind down the limestone gorge
through the floodplain forest
to the riverbank
where my shadow often hides.

Do you think all of them
the river
cottonwoods maples oaks
tall grass smooth sand
an old hollowed out tree trunk
my shadow
are pondering the meaning
of transformation down below
like me up above?

Is the river lecturing the limestone on erosion? The trunk,
supine on the sand, conferring with grass
on when the first real snow will happen?
The wise oaks reminding no one in particular:
change is just change, some good some bad,

some wanted some not,
some making you better, some worse—
my shadow adding:
but always different than you were before?

If I called out loudly enough
would they listen to my list
of things both calamitous and reversible,
magical and mundane causing change?
And if I joined them below
would they console me as I grieve
the losses change has brought?
Celebrate with me as I revel
in the unexpected joys of transformation?

But I don't call out.
I don't descend
the stone steps to the river.
I remain above running
towards the big hill waiting
for better words or woods or wind to blow in clarity
or at least the scent
of mulching leaves decomposing below,
their earthy musty stench
(almost, but not quite, the right amount of sweet)
providing the inevitable conclusion
to any rumination on change.

IN AND

Take in oxygen

Take in the gorge's green veil the sky's cerulean dome the silvery white sliver of river

Accept what is offered:
inspiration

What you need for breathing:
lungs intercostal muscles a diaphragm
comfortable pants

What breathes:
noses mouths skin leaves
living things

Reasons why we breathe:
so we don't die to embrace the world to take in oxygen to calm
down to walk to run to fly we don't need a reason our body will do it
anyway

How to breathe in:
use your lungs breathe deeply
through your nose and mouth
with your diaphragm
as your abdomen extends
so does your invitation to the world
to enter and fill you with wonder and gratitude

OUT

Release carbon dioxide

Release worries
expel doubt

Reject what doesn't provide energy:
expiration

What you don't need:
someone telling you to
calm down and breathe

What doesn't breathe:
that annoying race t-shirt
my mom not since September 30, 2009

Reasons why I can't breathe:
too much humidity running too fast a stuffed-up nose from inhaling
lake water finding out my mom was dying from stage 4 pancreatic
cancer

How to breathe out:
Relax your shoulders
let your body do the work
of forcing the carbon dioxide out
let go of your resistance
to grieving what you are losing prepare for
another breath

VERTICAL WANDERINGS

Does it start with a running log entry from May 28, where I ran for 4 miles and then wrote about a small wood that I'd been tracking all spring, near some old stone steps and adjacent to a sandy beach beside the Mississippi River? Or with my decision to train for a marathon and to use that training time for more than running, but for learning how to pay attention to things like trees and the progress of their leaves through the seasons and then to write about them? Or a move closer to the river—from a mile away to a 5 minute walk or a 2 minute run—that lead to daily visits to the Mississippi River Gorge? Or the desire to live up to Maira Kalman's question, posed on a podcast—"We see trees, what more do we need?" Or an encounter online with the wonderful headline: Trees are the lungs of the earth? Or Marilyn Nelson's tree alone on the horizon? Dorothea Tanning's trees as beautiful, envious paralytics? John Roscoe's cousins, the trees?

Or perhaps my curiosity about the leaves on the trees I run by almost every day starts with Linda Paston's poem, "Vertical," which I found while searching online for "poetry and trees"?

"Perhaps the purpose
of leaves is to conceal
the verticality
of trees"

1.

Perhaps the purpose of leaves is to conceal the horizontality of trees, their branches stretching wide and far, wandering, interrupting hierarchies of sky and ground. Disrupting views.

2.

*Perhaps the purpose
of leaves is to conceal
creating mystery
and wonder
and fear:
what's in those woods?*

3.

Perhaps the purpose

of leaves is to
irritate and annoy:
why can't I see
to the river anymore?

4.

*Perhaps the purpose
of leaves is*
B R E A T H I N G .

5.

*Perhaps the purpose
of leaves*
never matters
as much to the trees
as it does to us.

6.

*Perhaps the purpose
of
life
is
to
pay
attention
to the trees
and their leaves.*

7.

*Perhaps the purpose
in running
especially
up a hill*

is to be
like a tree
with your
trunk vertical
thinking TALL
looking high
to the horizon.

8.

Perhaps the
tree wants
to be more
like me:
running
not restless
not rooted.

9.

Perhaps
we
me and a tree—
both breathing
leaning towards the light
singing with the wind
returning
one day
to the soil
to be recycled—
are more alike
than I've considered.

10.

Perhaps.

LISTENING

absent

P erhaps
L istening to music
A ll the time leaves
Y ou with very
L ittle connection to the
I s: the concrete realness of things, the
S ilence and sounds,
T he this of being present on the path.

present

N ot silence
O nly sounds:
H eavy breathing, sweat loudly
E vaporating
A cross my forehead,
D ogs barking sharply, their collars clanging,
P eople chattering incessantly,
H ardly stopping to listen
O r absorb the landscape.
N o break,
E ven the gentle breeze, with its constant
S ighs, interrupts.

the purple banana

P rince might have
L iked how much
A ttention I'm paying to his lyrics. Did
Y ou know he sings the
L ine, "let's look for the purple banana"?
I didn't, until the
S ong started playing while I was running
T he other day and I listened

the daily walker

N ow, after years
O f running, I am finally listening! I
H ear my breathing,
E very inspiration and expiration and
A ll the rhythms as my foot strikes
D own on the
P ath. I
H ear the greetings from
O ther runners and the walker who
N ever misses his daily walk.
E very time I encounter him he
S ays "good morning" to me. I never noticed until now.

SOUNDTRACK 1: PLAYLIST

runs done while listening to a playlist: 101

1. wander aimlessly about
howling
in song
listenin' for the
leaves
gently
ushered in
to a
dream of running

Across the ancient
water

2. To the sound of the beat
I'm ready, yes, I'm ready
two feet

Repeat

3. whoa
my heart
I believe
I wanna play
anything
dream
always
dazing amazing
I just keep saying
Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah

SOUNDTRACK 2: NO HEADPHONES

runs done with no headphones on: 107

1. Crows cawing above the bridge
2. A woodpecker pecking below the bluff
3. Geese honking across the river
4. The worn wheels of a car, plodding along the road
5. The sharp thud of shoes on the paved path
6. The dull thud of shoes on dirt and debris
7. The crunch of shoes on salt and gravel
8. The crack of a brittle branch breaking
9. A zipper pull, rhythmically banging against a jacket
10. A dog's collar clanging
11. An airplane, faint and far above the trees
12. Wind rustling in the dead leaves that never fell off last fall
13. The quick and unexpected laughter of a woman on a path below
14. Bike wheels whirring, rapidly approaching
15. Phantom steps from runners who seem to be gaining yet never pass,
the shuffle of their shoes so slight it's possible they don't exist,
only imagined in a dream
16. A walker talking quietly into a phone
17. Children singing loudly
18. Water dripping down the rocks
19. A train rumbling overhead
20. A car alarm beeping, muffled through a window
21. The low, unrelenting hum of the city

NOVEMBER WIND, A FUGUE

November 15/4 MILES

37 degrees

wind: 16 mph/gusts up to 25 mph

mississippi river road path, north/south

Dark. Gray. Colder. Leaving the house, I see the trees swaying and decide not to wear headphones. I will listen to the wind. What song will it sing today as I run above the gorge? It rumbles deeply. Too soon its tune blends in with other sounds and I struggle to keep track. Was that the wind nudging my back or a car driving along the river road? Wind blowing turns into cars whooshing into a bike wheel whirring into dry brush shshshushing into a leaf blower buzzing into my shallow breaths wheezing into sandy grit crunching into traffic faintly rushing into grass softly sifting into wind swirling and sizzling. So many sounds, one flowing into the next, never starting or stopping just shifting, carrying the song of the november wind along the rim of the gorge.