

**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

TABLE OF CONTENTS

You Must Change Your Life

cycles

Mississippi River
In and Out

accumulations

Vertical Wanderings
Unmixed Attention Is Not Will

variations

Listening
Soundtrack 1
Soundtrack 2
November Wind, a Fugue

mutations

Patellar Subluxation

revelations

On the Occasion of My Mom's 75th Birthday
Things that Will Never Change

Notes

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.

cycles

MISSISSIPPI RIVER

Heraclitus claimed you can't
step into the same river twice.

Did you know you also can't
run beside the same river twice?

Run next to it every day
by the same things every time
it's always different.

The river is gray the next day blue
then white then hidden
behind the leaves of an oak tree.

Your feet are crunching on debris—
the acorn shells squirrels discarded
yesterday after cracking and collecting
and hiding the nuts.

Fat tires are riding
past so quick roller skiers skate by
poles singing clickity-clack wheels sighing
wishing winter would come back.

The river flows downstream
rushing fast then
stopped cold
by a thick crust of ice.

The gorge is white then green
then white again from cottonwood snow
then more green quick glances below
yield nothing but a dark viridian veil
and occasional bursts of sparkling blue
cutting through until

Crimson! Vermillion! Burnished Gold!
first a flash then a bright constant light

shining until it burns out

leaving nothing but

the bare bones of

forest exposed

secrets spilled

mysteries solved

river revealed.

Soon the river will hide

and you will forget

running beside

a different Mississippi.

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

accumulations

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.

UNMIXED ATTENTION IS NOT WILL

a cento composed from poems memorized while injured

Unmixed attention is obedience to a mystery is prayer is belief is faith is love is swimming one day in August is sweet scented stuff when the breeze draws across it is pausing to attend to the goldfinches who have gathered in a field for a musical battle is touching the face of every blossom, not choosing this blossom or that blossom, is heeding the call, harsh and exciting, of the wild geese and the world is going down to the sea for the deepening and the quieting of the spirit is walking into words that have been waiting for you to enter is counting five mountain ranges, one behind the other, is listening at his heart—little, less, nothing is grieving over goldengrove unleaving is thinking of a sheep knitting a sweater is not pride not clenched jaws not stiffening muscles not seeing all spoiled not a miracle just beyond our heavy headed grasp not imagining that trees just stand there when we're not looking not walking, on your knees, for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting not telling one's name—the livelong June, to an admiring bog not praising this but not that, loving this but not that and not will.

variations

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.

mutations

PATELLAR SUBLUXATION

Pop. Pain. Fear. Shock. Panic. Something's not right. Something in my knee is not where it should be. Pain. Fear. Shock. Shit. What happened? Where is my kneecap going? Can't stand. Can't walk. Please stop. Please return to your place. I'll stop running if you stop sliding. I just want to be able to walk and to not worry about this and to not have Scott say, "something looks like it's sticking out wrong." Oh god, I'm going to bed.

Appointment. Normally, a patella rests and easily glides in a groove, between two femoral condyles, located at the end of the femur. My patella does not and, as a result, has partially displaced. It did this on a Saturday night in the family room in August, two months before I was planning to run my first marathon, when I got up from a chair and twisted my knee the wrong way. This displacement is painful but temporary and is called a patellar subluxation. I do not know this right away when I twist my knee. I know this 3 weeks after that Saturday when my doctor tells me at my appointment.

Training. 7 months earlier, I had decided to train for my first marathon and to use that training time for not just running, but for learning how to pay attention to the trees or my breathing or how the wind sounds or how my foot feels as it strikes the ground and then write about them in an online running log. Running and writing, running then writing, writing while running helped my writing to move and breathe. Now, stuck on the couch, unable even to walk, I feel trapped. No movement in my legs, no movement in my words.

Ending. My doctor tells me I can run the marathon, but it will hurt. A lot. My physical therapist tells me that we need to wait and see how my knee does over the next couple of weeks. No running until the swelling is gone. I listen to my therapist. I wait and wonder: is this the end of my marathon dream? It is. My therapist tells me this a month later.

Lines. After days of sitting on the couch, restless and missing my run, I wake up one morning and memorize a poem: Gerard Manly Hopkins' "Spring and Fall." The act of reading the lines out loud and over and over again is more than distracting. It's exciting. Exhilarating. I decide to memorize more poems in the mornings. And I do, a dozen in all over the next month, sitting at my dining room table.

Limericks, Ghazals, Rondeaux, Ballads, Rhyming verses, Centos, Acrostic Poems. I need some distraction from feelings: panic, frustration, anxiety, restlessness, boredom, irritation, fear and sadness. So I experiment with different poetic forms. A limerick about feeling restless with a knee that got hurt shortly after dessert. A ghazal remembering the initial shock of injury that rhymes four days with sore days and not shocked, more dazed. A rondeau about bad knees and swimming with the refrain: the water is too cold. A ballad anticipating a doctor visit with a patient sitting in the waiting room, staring at her book, wond'ring what will happen when the doctor takes a look. A rhyming verse inspired by Shel Silverstein with little Sara Puotinen who could not lift her leg just then. A cento combining Mary Oliver and Emily Dickinson with nobodies who don't have to be good and only have to love frogs and bogs and wild geese and somebody. And acrostic poems that spell out injury and restless and limits and talk very crossly to injured right knees.

Anagrams. When I encounter a medical term that scares me, I write out its letters at the top of a piece of paper—big and capitalized and all spread out—and study them. Then I play with them, experimenting with different combinations. These experiments distract and delight me.

Repetitions. Every morning I write prose and poetry about injury. I record my feelings, my fears, my efforts to move in any way that I can by walking or biking or swimming. I recite lines, trying to remember them forever. Sitting at the table while the rest of my family is still sleeping, whispering them over and over and over again until they are mine. Later, I might recite them to my daughter who is usually willing to listen. I worry: Will I be able to run in the marathon in October? Will I need surgery? Will my knee ever recover? And I tell myself, more than once a day, it will all be okay, even when I don't believe it.

Strange, deranged words. Words can intimidate, alienate, overwhelm. My brain used to shut down when confronted with medical jargon. I would try, but just couldn't listen to the doctor discussing patellafemoral pain syndrome or oseophytes. I'm trying to overcome this by engaging with these scary words creatively. Rearranging letters to weaken their power over me. This is working. Patellafemoral pain syndrome might sound terribly scary, but O Moral Leap Felt! pain syndrome or A Feral Poem Toll pain syndrome don't. And who can be afraid of oseophytes (bone spurs), when they're transformed into a hot eye post or hot pot eyes or yo, the poets?

Uh oh. Days after the initial injury, I discover while sitting on the ground with my legs extended that I can easily lift my straightened left leg, but my right one refuses. It will not lift. This is weird. Sitting on the floor trying as hard as I can to make my right leg lift. Willing my brain to make it move. Nothing. Can't lift my heel. Can't even flex my quad muscle. This can't be good.

Googled "knee injury can't lift leg straight" and not being able to do this seems to be a bad sign. Maybe a quadricep tendon rupture. That requires surgery. And recovery can take more than 6 weeks.

First, I am mad:

I don't

Need this right now.

Just leave me alone, you

Unnecessary derailment. You

Repugnant spectre.

You destroyer of dreams!

Then, I calm down and gain some perspective:

I *might* be overreacting. Stirring up

Needless worry.

Judging every twinge of pain or limp as if it signaled my

Undoing, which it doesn't. Not

Really. I'll run again or swim or something.

Years (or weeks?) from now this will make a good story.

Then, I imagine a different world where straight leg raise means something else:

Rise, starlight age!

I light a grass tree.

I right a glass tree.

Sigh, art's great lie!

Better words. Sometimes a pop. Sometimes a slide. Occasionally a slip or a crunch. More panic than pain. None of these descriptions quite capture the feeling of what has been happening to me and my right knee the past few years. Do you know how many different injuries are described as being signaled by a pop or slip or a crunch? A lot. I need better words.

Luke. Almost half of the poems I memorize are Mary Oliver poems: "Wild Geese," "Swimming, One Day in August," "Invitation," "Can You Imagine" and "Luke." The harsh and exciting call of her wild geese. Her praise for being alive on a fresh morning in a broken world. The invitation she extends to let the spirit deepen and go quiet or to tell her about despair. Her trees that are annoyed by birds and the slow, silent passing of time—their dark rings thickening—but are patient and happy anyway. And her dog Luke who is wild and free and content to love, without judgment, every blossom her nose touches. These lines make me feel calmer. More able to accept and adjust. Better.

29

Unimaginable. If you asked me to make a list of the top ten things that scare me or that I can't imagine having to go through, a full body MRI would be on it. If that list had been written 15 years ago, the top item would have been my mom dying. But she died, in 2009, and I survived. So when my therapist tells me that if my knee doesn't get better soon, I will need an MRI, one in which I am fully encased in a coffin-like tube, strapped to a table, unable to move, the curved walls closing in on me for up to an hour, I think that I will be able to survive that too. I reimagine the MRI, not as Magnetic Resonance Imaging, but as Musty Rusty Incubators or Mini Rhinos Inciting or Mutant Rats Infiltrating or Moody Radicals Impinging or Monster Roosters Incanting. This helps, especially the roosters, which I imagine will sing "The Girl from Ipanema" to me as I lay immobile on a table in the tube.

Xmarks the spot words. I'm always looking for the magic words. The ones that bring clarity. The ones that my doctor will immediately understand and then know what to do. I rarely find them. I'm always explaining things wrong. Too oddly. I get confused looks from doctors. Here is the problem: I like strange descriptions that are weird and wonderful and imaginative. And some part of me is stubbornly attached to this strangeness, making it hard to express myself clearly or simply or in ways that hit their mark. It would be nice to be understood, at least sometimes. But, then again, is it really necessary?

Acronyms. Sometimes I play with medical acronyms, converting their tedious explanations into whimsical wonderings. MRI is transformed from Magnetic Resonance Imaging to Musk Rat Infatuation. RICE, from Rest Ice Compress Elevate to Rapture is Coming Early or Red Indigo Copper Ecru or Rancid Icky Curdled Eggs or Random Isotopes Create Elements or Rhode Island Can't Even.

Therapy. My physical therapist has given me several exercises to do to aid in recovery: isometric quads, functional knee extensions with tubing, passive knee extension stretches, squats and supine heel slides. My favorite exercise is the supine heel slide because I have liked the word "supine" ever since it was one of my vocabulary words in high school, along with restive, chimerical and harbinger, and because the movement, sliding my heel up towards my butt and then away from it while lying down, seems to help the most in loosening up my leg.

Ice. Here's the best way I can think of to describe how it feels to walk around with a messed up kneecap that might suddenly, even when I'm wearing a brace, pop or pang or slide or shift: Sometimes in the winter, when the sidewalks are covered with new ice, or covered with old ice hidden by freshly fallen snow, or covered with ice that was melted snow that refroze overnight in jagged patches, I walk too carefully. My whole body is tense, waiting to fall. I ache in anticipation. My legs are tight. My movement forced, unnatural, very uncomfortable. I am fearful, apprehensive. Right now, in the first week of September, I am walking like it's winter and there's ice on the sidewalk.

Owning words. I sit at the dining room table and repeat lines over and over again until I own them. "Bedeviled,/human, your plight, in waking is to choose the words/that even now sleep on your tongue, and to know that tangled/among them and terribly new is the sentence that could change your life." Choose the words/that even now sleep on your tongue. Choose the words/that even now sleep on your tongue. Choose the words that even now sleep...

New words. Some words make me worry too much, so I look for new words that make me wonder instead. I memorize poetry. Remix poetry. Write poetry. See poetry everywhere and in everything. I switch out oseophytes and patellar instability syndromes and bone realignment surgeries for goldengroves unleaving and musical battles with goldfinches and sentences that are waiting to wake up and change my life.

revelations

ON THE OCCASION OF MY MOM'S 75TH BIRTHDAY

I wanted to take her on my run.

I wanted her beside me as I traveled on the bluff above the Mississippi.

To talk about the trees or
the poetry class I was taking or
what she was weaving on her loom or
where to plant zinnias in my backyard or
the latest book about history she was reading or
the wildflowers she knew the names of but I didn't or
when the Real Housewives would stop being a thing or
why you can't find a decent pair of jeans that aren't skinny or
how it was to be seventy-five when you always feel 17. But

I couldn't.

She's dead.

8 years now.

And when

I'm running

I can't spare

the energy

needed to

imagine her

beside me.

The most I

can do

is imagine

she's the shadow

leading me
or the
runner I
encounter on
the path.

A few months ago running
south on the river road I thought
I saw her coming towards me—at
least the her I like to remember—mid
50s short reddish hair (before she started dyeing
it blonde to hide the gray) teal shorts muscular legs
jogging so slow she is almost walking. I know it isn't
her but for less than a minute I allow myself to believe my
mom is still alive never diagnosed with a death sentence
never not running or walking or breathing. Then I remember

if those things
hadn't ended—
mainly the breathing—
I might not
have started
running or writing
to reshape my grief.

Who would I be
without my grief?
Someone else. Someone
whose Mom is still alive but
maybe not someone who loves
to run or someone who is writing a poem
for their dead mom on the occasion of her 75th birthday.

THINGS THAT WILL NEVER CHANGE

The Mississippi River Gorge is magnificent

Injuries can be endured and often overcome

The leaves on the oak trees near the gorge will fall again and you will be able to see St. Paul

Poems can heal

Supine is a wonderful word

Paying attention is more an act of surrendering will than asserting it

When running by the river, sounds shift strangely

Mary Oliver is magic

Breathing continues until it doesn't

Mothers will die

Runners/Writers/Daughters will survive

Your life must change you

You must change your life

NOTES

All of the poems included in this collection either began as log entries in my online running log or were created using material from those entries.

Unmixed Attention is not Will, a cento includes lines from the following poems and prose, which I memorized while injured:

Gerard Manly Hopkins, "Spring and Fall"

Emily Dickinson, "Nobody"

Mary Oliver, "Wild Geese"; "Swimming, One Day in August"; "Invitation"; "Luke"; "Can you Imagine?" and *Long Life*

Robert Frost. "Out, Out—"

Franz Wright, "Auto-lullaby"

Marie Howe, "The Meadow"

Simone Weil, "Attention and Will"

Soundtrack 1: Playlist was created using lyrics from:

Blitzen Trapper, "Furr"

Queen, "Another One Bites the Dust"

Justin Bieber, "Baby"