

THE LONG ISLAND WOMAN INTERVIEW

Maria Shriver

A Meaningful Life

photos: Lindsay Wilkes

In the Introduction to her latest book, *I've Been Thinking...: Reflections, Prayers, and Meditations for a Meaningful Life*, Maria Shriver writes that she grew up in a family “where people did really big things.”

That is an understatement.

Members of the Kennedy family have done some of the biggest things. Shriver's grandfather, Joseph P. Kennedy, was appointed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to be the first chairman of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission and also ambassador to the United Kingdom. Men whom Shriver called “uncle” served as U.S. Attorney General (Robert Kennedy), U.S. Senator (Edward Kennedy), and, of course, U.S. President (John F. Kennedy), all as staunch Democrats. Her mother, Eunice (Kennedy) Shriver, started the Special Olympics, and her father, Sargent Shriver, was founding director of the Peace Corps.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Shriver, a daughter of such American royalty, would grow up wondering what her place would be among these giants and where her life's journey would take her.

To her credit, she has done some pretty big things herself. Rather than ride the coattails of her famous family, she chose journalism as a profession and worked her way up from writer to producer to anchor at both CBS News and NBC News. She spent seven years as First Lady of California, a job she fell into when her then-husband (she filed for divorce in 2011) actor/bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger—a Republican—was elected governor in 2003. Although she admits she took on the position reluctantly, having to leave her treasured job as journalist, she grew to cherish the role as First Lady, building the world's largest women's conference, founding the Minerva Awards to honor women who were making a difference, working on behalf of struggling families, and championing service and activism.

Since 2003, when her father was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, a progressive form of dementia that destroys memory and has robbed millions of vital mental functions, she hasn't stopped fighting for a cure. *The Shriver Report: A Woman's Nation Takes on Alzheimer's*, a 2011 survey conducted by Shriver and the Alzheimer's Association, reported for the first time that a whopping two-thirds of the brains that develop Alzheimer's belong to women. Ever since, Shriver has been determined to find out why, pushing for increased funding and founding the Women's Alzheimer's Movement.

What Is Happening to Grandpa?, a book she released in 2004 to help explain Alzheimer's to children, is just one of her best-selling books whose origins stem from pivotal points in Shriver's own life—describing the death of her grandmother, Rose Kennedy, to her children (*What's Heaven?*, 1999), giving a commencement speech to young people starting their careers (*Ten Things I Wish I'd Known—Before I Went Out into the Real World*, 2000), sending children off to college (*One More Thing Before You Go...*, 2007). Similarly, *I've Been Thinking...*, which evolved from a weekly column she writes for her digital newsletter, *The Sunday Paper*, offers that same honest reflection, at age 62, of where she's been and what comes next.

In her books, Shriver, who calls herself “fiercely independent,” has poked holes in that famously impenetrable Kennedy veneer and writes from a place deep in her heart and in her mind. Growing up in a family that experienced much tragedy and loss, she and her four brothers had been taught to put their heads down and power through. However, she has learned the value of vulnerability and of asking for help, even though it puts her outside of her comfort zone. If her famous uncle sought to put Americans into space, perhaps Shriver has found that being “down to earth”—revealing the woman behind the curtain as well as the one at the podium—can be just as inspiring and motivational.

In talking to Shriver, it is clear that, among her many roles, the one she cherishes most is that of mother to her four children: Katherine, Christina, Patrick, and

Christopher. Her family, her friends, and her faith help drive her to become what she calls an “architect of change,” which she defines as making a difference and moving humanity forward.

On her own terms, Shriver is living her life—foibles and all—out loud and wide open. In her interview with *LONG ISLAND WOMAN*, she talks about her book and her life in a way that is both easygoing and relatable but also rousing and resolute, as if wanting to hold your hand and then pick you up and point you in the right direction. And it is in that desire to help others discover meaning that the woman who once worried about whether she would live up to her family legacy of bigness has, perhaps, managed to achieve the biggest thing of all.

Your latest book, “I've Been Thinking...,” focuses on your quest for a meaningful life. What is your personal definition of a meaningful life?

I decided that it's having a purpose that's larger than myself—something that helps me get up every day and be excited about my life and the world and my role in the world. For me, it's a life of faith, a life of family, and expanding that definition of family to include as many people as possible around one's table. It's continuing to evolve and to learn and to, wherever possible, make amends. I try to look at my life 10 or 15 years out, and I want to be standing in what I call the “open field.” I want to look back and think ‘Did I do something? Was I kind? Did I pick up the pieces where I needed to? Are all the people that I need here?’ That's what's important to me.

This is the first book you've written since your mother passed away in 2009. You describe her as a strong woman who taught you to be strong because she had grown up in “a man's world.” But you talk to your own daughters about living in an “everyone's world.” What has changed? And how has the power of women evolved in your lifetime?

When I started in journalism, there were no women in the newsroom. There weren't other women who served as examples for me, women who were having children and keeping their network news jobs. But as women came into the newsroom—they wore men's suits, these power suits that were big, right—it made it possible for others to go in.

Women who work in journalism today can do what they do—have maternity leave and come back—because other women before them worked through it and made it possible, and I think that's the case, really, in every profession. There were pioneers who said it's really “everybody's world.”

And the question before women now is: if we can lead and have a seat at the table, how will we lead differently from men? If we don't like the way men did it, what are we going to do that's different from what they did? What are the values that we're going to put forth? Are we going to include them at the table? If we're so mad that we weren't included, are we going to do the same thing? Or are we going to be more compassionate, more open, more collaborative?

That's what I talk to my girls about, and when I talk to my boys, I say the same thing: make sure that as many people as possible are at the table. Make sure that you have an emotional IQ, so to speak, and not just an intellectual one. Years ago, when I was trying to get to that table, you had to claw your way because people didn't want you at that table, and you had to hold your seat, just like in musical chairs. When the music stops, don't get up!

I'm not saying it's so much easier for women today, because I think every generation has its challenges. But people have paved the way so that now having different voices at the table is more expected, more normal.

Until I read your book, I did not know that two-thirds of those who have Alzheimer's disease were women.

Most people don't know that, which is why my purpose is to educate, not just women, but the public at large—doctors, researchers—and demand that they look

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at what's going on with women. Why do they have so many inflammation diseases? What is the role of estrogen? What are the roles of hormones? We must spend some time looking at how women age differently than men. That's not sexist, that's smart.

I've been working in this space of Alzheimer's, really clawing my way to the table, clawing my way to the ears of researchers and doctors and saying, "Women are being affected more. It's not just because we live longer." And that has really been a big mountain to climb because when I first started, everybody told me no, that wasn't right, that I didn't know what I was talking about, that it wasn't true.

Then people will ask, "Well, will you come and help us?" I'm, like, no, I don't go anywhere unless they agree to start a women's fund. Things are better today, though, way better than when I started.

Has there been progress in finding a cure?

Well, there are certainly a lot of people focused on it. There's no pill, there's no prevention, so that's the bad news, but we do know that lifestyle impacts. We do know that your genes are not your destiny. We do know that exercise helps. We do know that meditation helps. We do know managing stress helps. But we don't have the answer, and I maintain that perhaps we've been looking in the wrong places. So that's why I'm pushing for research on women, trying to get younger women into clinical trials, trying to put out the message of prevention, and looking at people with early cognitive impairment, not just at people who already have Alzheimer's.

In your book, there is a chapter titled "The Power of Listening." In a 2008 interview, you said that at the beginning of your marriage you worried a bit about how the difference in politics between you and your husband would affect your children. Yet, the situation ended up being a wonderful side effect, you said, because your children learned how to listen to others' points of view. Here we are ten years later. Do you feel in this current sociopolitical climate that people are listening to each other less?

I think they are. All four of our children are Independents (Shriver also registered as an Independent a few years ago), and I think it's easier in a way to listen to an Independent because you don't immediately think they're the enemy. So easily, we all think the other is the enemy. Women think, "Oh, men are going to be this way." Or men think, "Here comes a woman, she's going to do this." Democrats say, "Oh, he or she is a Republican." I assume this; I'm judging that.

I think it would be part of my work—and certainly what I try to do with my *Sunday Paper*—to put all points of view out there and try to get people to listen and to hear without judgment. If we can get to that place and not have a preconceived notion, we can hear somebody much better. That's a very powerful thing. People used to say, "Oh, my God, you married a Republican!" I would say, "Well, you have to listen to him first," and people almost couldn't bear it. When they finally did, they'd say, "I didn't realize he was this or this or this," because people judge before they listen.

Maria with her children



I've always thought that people—women, in particular—are very hard on themselves. Would you agree?

Yes, I would. I actually had that conversation with my daughter driving to an interview this morning. We've done this film called *Take Your Pills* about the Adderall epidemic—it was her idea (Shriver and daughter Christina Schwarzenegger are executive producers of the film). It's a documentary that airs on Netflix, and I said to her, "You've got to stop being so tough on yourself. I'm going to give you ten minutes in the morning and ten minutes in the evening to complain and beat yourself up, and then you've got to stop, because you're beautiful and smart, and the way you speak to yourself is unacceptable."

Unfortunately, maybe I did some of that myself, because I'm tough on myself, and I didn't realize that I could be another way until later in my life. I said to her, and I say this to her sister, "That critical voice is not your own. It doesn't serve you, because the world is critical. So lighten up on yourself, because people are already judging you, and then you pile on when you could actually cut yourself a break. You could encourage yourself, be a friend to yourself, a cheerleader for yourself as opposed to this wretched critical voice."

As First Lady of California, what would you say was your biggest achievement and also the biggest lesson you learned?

That was a great job. I had a judgment about it going in, and I was wrong. I went in thinking; I don't want to be like an ornament. But it turned out to be not only a great honor but a great platform, not just for myself, to amplify my own voice, but for others. I got to meet people from all walks of life, some of whom became lifelong friends.

I got to make a difference, and it turned out to be an incredible blessing for me. We ran an office that was bipartisan and created programs out of thin air. I had free rein and could run a little start-up, so to speak, of my own—and not only did we run and build this behemoth of a conference that gave people the chance to use their voices, but we inspired hundreds of thousands of people to change their lives. We funded entrepreneurs, put people through college, got people out of domestic violence situations, and it was really a pioneering conference that now every other conference has copied and emulated. I'm really proud of my seven years as First Lady and very grateful for the opportunity to have served.

One of my favorite lines of "I've Been Thinking..." is when you compare an older woman to a precious gift that has been wrapped in gift paper. Essentially, you say, just because the wrapping paper is wrinkled or folded doesn't make the present inside worth any less.

Yeah, and remembering that is a daily job. I have to walk in a room and think about what I offer that's different and unique. My energy has to be contagious. I have to stay connected, stay growing, stay evolved, and I can't get beaten down by the concept of age. I think society can do that to you—and we're all guilty of doing that to ourselves and others—so I think it's super-important to keep your eye on who

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Maria with Gwyneth Paltrow

you are on the inside, what you bring to the table, and to keep valuing that because that's a powerful gift. And if you don't value that, trust me, no one else is going to value it either.

You commented in your book that you could no longer take a good photograph

without it being touched up.

That's true. I mean, my daughters will say that's not true, and if I were on the cover of a magazine, I would be touched up just like everybody else. But if I look at pictures of myself when I'm 20, 25, or 30, I'm like, "Wow, everything was just flawless there, right?" You don't appreciate it when it's flawless. So I say to my daughters, "Appreciate your beauty. Appreciate your youth. Appreciate looking in the mirror and seeing something that looks back at you that's just wow. Youth is a beautiful thing, and so I work at looking in the mirror today and saying to myself, It's okay.

I have this memory of telling my grandmother how beautiful she is, and she would always roll her eyes. It wasn't until I was older that I realized that perhaps she did that because she was comparing what she saw in the mirror to what she once looked like as a young woman. And that stopped her from being able to see herself in the beautiful way I saw her.

That's the thing that Alzheimer's also taught me. My kids told me to appreciate my dad for who he is now as opposed to who he was when I was 20 or a young girl. And I think that's the same thing about age. So many of us look in the mirror, and it's not who we are accustomed to seeing. It's not the same person, and when we walk in the room, it's not the same reaction. So you have to get at peace with your age and what you bring, and that's why it's important to keep learning and evolving. When my mother walked into the room, she was always the star, with all her wrinkles and her gray hair. Everybody wanted to talk to her. So that was my model—be that woman. ▲

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More Maria

Favorite Movie: *The Wedding Crashers, Knocked Up.* I like *The Sound of Music*, too, but I like a good laugh..

Favorite Snack/Candy: Swedish fish, licorice, but I can't eat Swedish fish anymore because they give me a headache—too much sugar in that.

Favorite Book: Probably Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *Gift from the Sea*. But, now, *I've Been Thinking...*

Favorite Song: "What a Wonderful World."

Favorite Vacation Spot: Anywhere I am with my kids.

Favorite Concert: I went to see James Taylor in college and Carole King, and they were great moments. I've been to a U2 concert and Jon Bon Jovi. I love both of them. And I went to a Beyoncé concert, and that was awesome too.

Favorite Quote: Probably this Ralph Waldo Emerson quote: "What lies behind us and what lies before us are small matters compared to what lies within us." And I really like this quote from Sister Joan Chittister: "The moment a woman comes home to herself, the moment she knows that she has become a person of influence, an artist of her life, a sculptor of her universe, a person with rights and responsibilities who is respected and recognized, the resurrection of the world begins."

