



# Book Just Who Will You Be?

## Big Question. Little Book. Answer Within.

Maria Shriver  
Hyperion, 2008  
Listen now

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## Recommendation

This brief little book by Maria Shriver is sincere and simple. In it, she poses the question; “Just who will you be?” She tells of her own journey to find the answer, sparked by a commencement speech – including an extended poem – that she gave to her nephew’s graduating class. She realized that stripped of her exterior roles and identities – First Lady of California, wife of actor turned politician, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, member of the Kennedy family and network television newswoman – she felt empty and uncertain. Not surprisingly, her spiritual search revealed that roles and fame don’t define you. Every human is worthy of love and respect. If you don’t mind an occasional touch of the sentimental and even, sometimes, sophomoric, and you’re curious about the book’s famous author, *BooksInShort* believes you’ll enjoy this visit with her.

## Take-Aways

- Author Maria Shriver is a television personality, the wife of California Governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, the mother of four and a member of the Kennedy family.
- She suffered an identity crisis when her son described her as a “housewife.”
- After working in TV news for two decades, she no longer had a job to define her.
- Maria’s nephew asked her to give his high school’s commencement speech.
- In her speech she posed the question, “Just who will you be?”
- She recited a poem she wrote. It received a warm reception and inspired this book.
- Maria then asked herself the same question. Her search for the answer revealed that the roles you play do not define you.
- You can’t live your life hoping to fulfill other people’s expectations.
- To find out who you really want to be, you must follow your heart.
- Everyone deserves love, and is entitled to pursue his or her dreams and ambitions.

## Summary

### Maria Shriver’s Meltdown

One day, Maria Shriver was shopping with her teenage son. A passerby asked her son if Shriver was a model. “A model!” he exclaimed. “No, she’s just a housewife.” That was a pivotal moment for Shriver. After all, she had never thought of herself as a housewife. As a little girl, she had spent many hours dreaming about what she

would be when she grew up, but “housewife” never made the list.

“I’m still a work in progress, and I’m writing my next act now.”

She decided on her future course when she was a teenager in 1972. She attended the Democratic National Convention with her father, Peace Corps founding director and former Ambassador to France, Sergeant Shriver. [After the Convention’s vice presidential nominee, Thomas Eagleton, turned out to have mental health issues, Shriver’s father replaced him and campaigned to become vice president alongside presidential candidate George McGovern. Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew defeated them.] For Maria, the highlight of the whole experience was sitting in the back of the campaign plane with the reporters. The journalists covering the convention impressed her so much that she decided to pursue a career in television journalism.

“Sometimes life happens to you, and – bingo! – your idea of who you think you are just goes up in smoke.”

After she graduated from college, Shriver began working in television. She started off running errands, and then became a reporter and a producer until, finally, she made it to the top and became a network anchor at NBC News. She enjoyed her busy career and her identity as a newswoman, however, she was no stranger to the limelight, having grown up amid the Kennedy family. Her mother, Eunice Kennedy Shriver (sister of the late President John F. Kennedy, the late Sen. Robert Kennedy and Sen. Ted Kennedy) founded the Special Olympics. Maria remembers dinners at the family table crowded with Peace Corps volunteers and afternoons when the family hosted Special Olympics athletes around its swimming pool.

## Off-Screen

Shriver lost her spot on network television when her husband, Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger, star of the *Terminator* movies, decided to run for governor of California. NBC felt that it would be a conflict of interest for Shriver to continue reporting the news. Schwarzenegger won the election and she had a new identity: First Lady of the State of California.

“I pledge to ‘show up’ in my life as myself, not as an imitation of anyone else.”

After working in television news for 25 years, Shriver now stopped being a newswoman. That left her wondering what she was instead. Was she really a housewife? After all, she did have four children and she wasn’t working at a steady job. Was she an author? She had written several books, but she was not writing at the time. Or, was she cast entirely in her role as a governor’s wife and, if so, what did that mean exactly?

“Just because people know your name, it doesn’t mean they know who you are.”

As Shriver was melting down into a severe identity crisis, her nephew called to ask for a favor. Would she please give the commencement speech at his high school graduation? She turned him down a few times, until he “played the guilty card,” and wheedled, “You’re my one and only godmother.” So she gave in, but she found planning for this speech more challenging than prepping for the countless others she had delivered. As Shriver pondered what she could possibly talk about to the graduating class, she realized that she would ask them the question that she had been struggling with at the time. She wouldn’t ask, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Instead, she would ask, “Who is the person you want to be? Who is the You you’ll become?”

“I had been living a life of privilege, power, and fame – filled with all the excitement, glamour, and high drama people dream of – but now when I stood still, I felt empty.”

The question struck a chord with her audience. In fact, so many people told Shriver that her speech inspired them that she decided to share it in a book.

## Shriver’s Speech

When Maria Shriver faced the audience at her nephew’s high school graduation, she began her speech by wondering aloud why the class asked her to talk in the first place. Was it because she is First Lady of the State of California? Or, perhaps, it was because she is married to a famous actor who had become a famous politician? No, if they wanted to hear about the Governor, they would have invited him.

“A deep change for me was realizing I’d have to take the time to know what I feel, in order to know who I am and who I want to be.”

It could have been, she supposed, because she is a Shriver, a member of America’s unofficial royal family, the Kennedys. Or, it could simply be because of her years of appearing on television as a reporter and anchor at NBC News. But that couldn’t be it, because, of course, she wasn’t on TV any more. Then Shriver realized that she got invited because combining all of these things makes her famous.

“Will you follow the crowd Or follow your gut? Will you be a leader Or anything but?”

“That’s it!” she declared. “It’s the fame thing! I can talk to you about the fame thing!” She tried to explain to the students what it really means to be famous. She asked them why people, especially teenagers, find the idea of fame so appealing. The media bombards you with images of famous people everyday. You see picture after picture of people who are famous for nothing other than being famous. Famous people always appear to be glad, slim, wealthy and beautiful. Yet, is fame a commendable life goal? It depends on why you want it and what you do with it.

“Take time to be quiet Hear what your own voice is Learn who you are By making good choices”

Fame in and of itself will not make you fulfilled or happy. The only true path to happiness is to listen carefully to your inner voice and let it guide you. That may be true, but, perhaps, you still want to be famous. That urge is okay, but ask yourself, “What do you want to be famous for?” You might decide to become famous so that you can fulfill some purpose, like making the world a better place. Become the type of famous person who is recognized as an individual of accomplishment, “integrity, character and vision.”

## The Message of the Poem

At this point in her speech, Shriver read a long poem she wrote for the occasion entitled, “Just Who Will You Be?” The poem posed some of the questions she had introduced earlier in her speech and offered students advice about becoming the kind of people they really wanted to be as adults. Think about what you want to do with your life after high school, she told them. It is better to “follow your gut,” and not the crowd. Avoid getting into trouble in college by recognizing the dangers of bad behavior and turning away from it, telling yourself, “I don’t need it.” Understand that you can be cool and kind at the same time. As Bill Gates once said, “Be nice to a nerd. He’ll be your boss someday!”

“And don’t be so fearful You’re too scared to fail I’ve had my share of failures And lived to tell the tale”

Avoid materialism. Instead of focusing on accumulating lots of stuff, which will never be truly rewarding, listen to your own inner voice and identify your genuine values. Understand that belongings do not define your worth as a human being. As Shriver wrote, “You can get the cool clothes, And the jewelry and car, But that doesn’t measure, The person you are.”

“As you go down the road As you see what you see You’ll keep right on learning Just who you will be”

On your way to becoming who you want to be, you will face pitfalls and make mistakes. You may feel alone as you strive for your goals, but keep trying. Don’t be afraid to take on difficult challenges, because that is how you will learn and grow. If you head up the wrong path, it is okay to “just change your mind.” As you build a career, don’t fear starting on the bottom rung of the ladder. Then, you can climb to the top and learn as you go, which is how Shriver built her television career. Seek a strong mentor to “guide you and teach you.” Don’t give your whole life up to your work, however. Take time to have fun. Remember, your work is not who you are.

“Think of using your brains And your talent and youth To solve difficult problems To find out the truth”

Set goals with meaning and purpose, and try to be of service to others. Tackling the world’s hard problems and raising wonderful children is far more important than simply striving to be famous. Fame is an “image,” not “your soul.” Apart from the “sparkle, the glitter and such,” famous people still must determine who they want to be when the spotlight turns away.

“So it’s not on the outside, The things you can see – It’s the stuff on the inside That shows who you’ll be”

Don’t believe stereotypes that might limit your life. Young women can be “girly and strong,” while young men can be “macho and still have a warm heart.” When they wed, young people should not lose their identities or marry just for “the steam” that will dissipate over time. If your spouse is also your friend, “you’ll have someone to laugh with, And you’ll love them still.” The poem ends:

“I pledge to ask myself, ‘who am I? What do I believe in? What am I grateful for? What do I want my life to stand for?’.”

“If you follow your heart... And just listen to me You’ll turn into the you... You are destined to be!”

## Lesson Learned

After her audience received her poem and her speech with so much enthusiasm, Shriver realized that it was time for her to listen to her own advice. After all, she had spent her whole life trying to live up to other people’s expectations. Now that she was no longer a television newscaster, she was confused about her identity. She had invested so much of her time establishing a public name for herself that she no longer knew who she was privately.

Her first instinct was to return to what felt the most comfortable. So she called NBC and asked for her old job back. To her relief and amazement, they said “yes.” However, Shriver decided to give herself a little time to think before she re-entered the workforce. As she sat and thought alone, a prayer from the Hopi tribe of Native Americans ran through her mind again and again. It said: “Here are the things that must be considered: Where are you living? What are you doing? What are your relations? Where is your water? Know your garden. It is time to speak your truth.”

Shriver realized that she no longer wanted to cover the news. Those days really were gone. However, that revelation left a huge void in her life. After all, her parents had raised her to believe that you are what you do. If you aren’t working, serving and achieving, then you barely exist. When Shriver abandoned the exciting identity of a famous, privileged and influential person who appeared on the national news, she felt frightened and empty.

The true answer, Shriver discovered, lay in her heart and soul. She came to see that who you are has nothing to do with your job title, what family you were born into or how much money you have. Everyone deserves love and respect just for being on this planet. All people are entitled to dream their own dreams, strive for their own goals and leave their own legacies.

Shriver learned that her various roles did not define her. Being the child of a well-known family, a television personality, the wife of a powerful man, the mother of four children and the author of several books are all part of her, but they are not and cannot be the entirety of her being.

When Shriver dared to ask, “Just who am I?”, she discovered many things about herself. She realized that she is a caring, nurturing and spiritual person. She can finally acknowledge herself as brave, creative and willing to take on new challenges. However, she had to admit that the things she had cared about deeply in her twenties and thirties are not necessarily the things she cares about as she grows older.

Daring to change her goals and her self-definition was a big step for Shriver, who was raised to push past her emotions, to “buck up, get a grip and carry on.” This point of view helped her achieve many of her goals, because she never stopped to feel the fear that might have held her back. Her gutsy attitude came from her famous family, but it had drawbacks. She always felt she had to “live up to the myth.” When she dared to define her own role, she could remove, “some of the armor I put on as a child and wore my whole life.” This sharpened her perceptions and made her more open to other people. She discovered that she felt a new softness and a new sense of caring “for myself and others.”

Shriver came to understand that she has to allow herself to grow and change, and that is what she advises others to do as well. She vows to continue to work on the things that she believes are important to her family, her community and the world. She will encourage her children to pursue their passions. She will also continue to observe her faith. Most importantly, she promises herself that she will try to live an authentic life and follow the path of her heart every day.

## About the Author

**Maria Shriver** is an award-winning journalist and the author of five bestsellers: *And One More Thing Before You Go...* and *Ten Things I Wish I'd Known – Before I Went Out into the Real World* for adults, and three children's books written with Sandra Speidel: *What's Heaven?*, *What's Wrong with Timmy* and *What's Happening to Grandpa?*

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