

“I’M IN THE MIDDLE!”
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Call to Gather: from Loudon Wainwright III
I’m a son, and I’m a father
I am just a middleman.¹

Reading: A poem by Barbara Crooker
In the Middle

of a life that's as complicated as everyone else's,
struggling for balance, juggling time.
The mantle clock that was my grandfather's
has stopped at 9:20; we haven't had time
to get it repaired. The brass pendulum is still,
the chimes don't ring. One day you look out the window,
green summer, the next, and the leaves have already fallen,
and a grey sky lowers the horizon. Our children almost grown,
our parents gone, it happened so fast. Each day, we must learn
again how to love, between morning's quick coffee
and evening's slow return. Steam from a pot of soup rises,
mixing with the yeasty smell of baking bread. Our bodies
twine, and the big black dog pushes his great head between;
his tail is a metronome, 3/4 time. We'll never get there,
Time is always ahead of us, running down the beach, urging
us on faster, faster, but sometimes we take off our watches,
sometimes we lie in the hammock, caught between the mesh
of rope and the net of stars, suspended, tangled up
in love, running out of time.²

Sermon

A few years ago my son attended an orientation for middle school called “I’m in the Middle!” As I think about my life, this title strikes me as a very good description about this phase. I’m in the middle! I’m forty-five years-old, smack in the middle of what Mary Oliver calls “the fretful forties.”³ At forty-five, I’m in the middle of my life-span

¹ <http://www.azchords.com/w/wainwrightloudon-4677/dumpthedog-80534.html>.

² A poem from *Radiance* by Barbara Crooker. http://www.panhala.net/Archive/In_the_Middle.html.

³ Mary Oliver, *Long Life* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2004), p. 84.

(though there's no guarantee this is the case. If I keel over tomorrow, declaring that I'm in the middle of my life-span today may strike you as a tad optimistic.)

I'm in the middle in many other ways besides the life-span. I'm sandwiched between elderly parents on the one hand who need increasing help, and kids who are not yet launched. Generationally I'm in the middle, too, on the cusp between the Baby Boomer generation and Generation X. (By the most commonly embraced delineations, I'm either two weeks or a year and two weeks on the Baby Boom side of the generational divide. But I was not consciously aware of the world beyond my immediate surroundings in the 1960s—the only big event I remember is Eisenhower's funeral in 1969. So I don't really feel like a Boomer. But I don't really feel like a Gen X-er either.) I live in Middle America in a middle-sized city. I drive the classic car of the middle-aged with kids: a minivan. With a change in my metabolism, I worry about increasing weight in my mid-section. The middle (along with the front) of my hair is rapidly disappearing. Politically—this might surprise some of you—I would describe myself as middle of the road. I'm in the middle class. Buddhism appeals to me because it represents the “Middle Way”—a reasonable path between polarities like asceticism and materialism. Anyway you look at it, I'm definitely in the middle!

A recent, massive study of two million middle-aged people living in eighty different countries showed that the bad press mid-life gets is pretty well deserved: it documented that mid-life is generally not a happy place to be. People in their 40s and early 50s are on the average less stable mentally and less happy than people who are younger or older. Apparently the mid-life blues don't discriminate on the basis of income, culture, gender or marital status. What's the magic age of the peak of mid-life angst? The study found that in the United States women hit the low point of mid-life at forty; men hit it at fifty.⁴ (Great: I have five years to go before I hit the bottom of mental instability and unhappiness!)

Poets may capture the treacherous terrain of mid-life even more powerfully than social scientists. In *The Divine Comedy*, for example, Dante opens the poem with a perspective on life from the mid-point (which was then thought to be thirty-five):

Midway on our life's journey, I found myself
In a dark woods, the right road lost. To tell
About those woods is hard—so tangled and rough

And savage that thinking of it now, I feel
The old fear stirring: death is hardly more bitter.
And yet, to treat the good I found there as well

I'll tell what I saw...⁵

And what he saw was not a pretty site: it was the Inferno. Now there's a great image for life in the middle. Parker Palmer adds another image that echoes Dante when he writes that the forties are the time of life “when monsters abound.”⁶

⁴ Melik Kaylan, *Wall Street Journal*, February 2, 2008.

⁵ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), p. 56.

⁶ Palmer, *The Active Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), p. 32.

Another indelible image of middle age comes to mind as well: the top of a bell-shaped curve. We start life on an upward trajectory that takes us up a mountain. Then somewhere around the middle of the lifespan the mountain flattens out for a moment or two at the summit. And then we start going downhill.

So here I stand, at forty-five undeniably in middle age, poised on the edge of my life's downward slope. To use the imagery of golf, I have completed the first nine holes and am taking a brief moment in the club house to review and refocus before tackling the Back Nine. My sharing today about this point in my life is admittedly self-indulgent. The way I figure it, doing a sermon on middle age might be preferable to—and cheaper than—buying a motorcycle or a fancy little sports car or having a fling with someone far younger than I. So thank you for your part in listening to my mid-life musings. I do hope that what I share will be at least a little bit helpful to those who are both younger and older than I—the younger will hear from one person what might lie ahead in life's journey, and the older perhaps will be able to make a little better sense of where you've been and where you are now in your journey.

Why is mid-life typically such rough ground? Well, for starters, we begin to realize that life is very short and time is whizzing by terribly quickly. It dawns on us that we probably aren't going to fulfill all the dreams we had for our lives. And the fact of our mortality comes into much sharper focus than it did when we were younger. The writer Melik Kaylan captures this aspect of mid-life well in a column on “The Midlife Blues” in a *Wall Street Journal* column:

Midlife is perhaps the last opportunity to shape your fate before you have to accept it; a phase when you are suddenly taunted by the lives unlived because you can still, though only just, try to live them; a time when you can still become what you might have been.”⁷

Well, in spite of all this, I believe that mid-life isn't all bad. On the whole, I don't find it that disturbing or depressing to be looking downward at the second half of my life. This downward image doesn't bother me much; in general I like prefer going downhill—in sledding and cross country skiing, for example—to going uphill. During the Saturday congregational response, one person shared that they don't like the downhill image of life's second half and prefer an image of an ever upward trajectory all the way right up to our death. And then we sore beyond the mountain top to who knows what's next. If this image or another works better for you than the downward slope, then use it! For me the main point is that there actually is a lot to commend life's descending slope. Parker Palmer, for example, observes that we spend a lot of the first half of our life abandoning the gifts of who we are in our quest to fit in and be liked.⁸ Many find the wisdom in life's second half to let go of our quest to fit in and be liked. We have the opportunity to become more truly ourselves.

Letting go of others' expectations and becoming more truly ourselves is not the only hard-earned wisdom that can enrich the second half of our lives. All of the mistakes we made—what Emerson wonderfully calls “the costly additions of experience”—yield

⁷ Kaylan.

⁸ Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, p. 12.

wisdom that we can put to excellent use in life's downward slope. Painful lessons well-learned can be a great blessing as we continue our journeys.

So at this mid-point, I want to share some of the more significant things I've learned so far in my journey:

- The self-centeredness of my younger years has given way to the realization that I am not the center of the universe. I am truly just a momentary speck, here for but a short time (even if I live to ninety) on a tiny dot in a universe that is massively beyond my comprehension. In the vast scope of time and space, I am nothing. And yet, as a part of the interdependent whole that is the universe, I am also significant. Every part matters. In *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, Bill Bryson observes that every atom that makes us up “almost certainly has passed through several stars and been part of millions of organisms on its way to becoming (us).” He goes on to observe that because atoms are so durable and are recycled after death, “a significant number of our atoms—up to a billion for each of us, it has been suggested—probably once belonged to Shakespeare.”⁹ To which I say: Cool! I am nothing, and I am a significant albeit small part of an ultimately indivisible whole. We all are: Shakespeare, you and I.
- Related to this: I've learned that it is highly unlikely that I will change the world in some magnificent way that will be remembered for generations let alone eons. But the way I live my life is not entirely inconsequential: since all is interrelated and ultimately one, we all make a difference. This realization helps put my actions in perspective—what I do in and of itself won't likely make or break the world (so I can lighten up a bit), but what I do also matters.
- I've learned that there's a whole lot I don't know; there's a whole lot I'll never know. Therefore, it's okay to ask dumb questions or admit my ignorance when I don't have a clue what someone else is talking about. Even in the things I know best—being a husband, father, and minister, for example—what I don't know vastly outweighs my little sliver of knowledge. An implication of this is that it is easy to feel like an imposter even in our areas of (relative) expertise. A few years ago I learned something about one of my heroes, Ralph Waldo Emerson, that has stayed with me: he struggled through much of his early and mid-life with the fear that others would discover that he really wasn't all that smart. This in spite of the fact that he was recognized as a great intellect in both the United States and Europe. That Emerson worried about being an imposter somehow gives me comfort when I feel like one.
- I've learned that time does really fly. It seems to only go faster as our lifespan proceeds. And I've learned that the best way to handle this reality is to stop looking at the clock so much. Rather than worrying about how little time remains, savor this moment and live as if it might be your last (which in fact might be the case). Sometimes we need to take off our watches and lie in the hammock. Several years ago Mark Marnocha shared a story that he and I have been unable to find again. I jotted down the story's punch-line and keep it in my calendar as a reminder. I've hesitated using the line in a sermon because it's expressed in language that could be considered inappropriate. But in the

⁹ Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004), p. 134.

aftermath of the furor over Obama's former pastor, this feels like the time to share it. Here's the line: "What's the god-damn rush?" What a great reminder to have in my calendar!

- I've learned that the nature of life is change. Our bodies change, our relationships change, our self-understandings change, our minds change (which is why politicians' "flip-flopping" doesn't necessarily bother me very much: it can be a sign of wisdom). Everything changes. Heck, we've learned in the last hundred and fifty years that everything around us changes, too: all life changes and evolves. Go back in time a hundred million or a billion years and the world was a very different place. Fast forward the same amount of time and the changes would be no less mind-boggling. In our own lives, things can change remarkably in a year or a decade—or even a day. If this isn't a particularly happy period for you wherever you are in your journey, well, hang in there because there might be a lot more happiness just around the bend. This is why Melik Kaylan counsels that the best thing to do when the mid-life blues slap you in the face is: "Hang in there. It will all blow over."¹⁰
- And I've learned that humility and gratitude are terribly important qualities to cultivate. Given the massive scale of the universe as well as the interconnectedness of all things, it should be abundantly clear by middle age that a whole lot in our lives is way beyond our control. The good things that happen to us and the bad are never totally our own doing. So it is wise to be humble about one's accomplishments. And it is wise to be grateful for all the blessings that do come our way.

As I contemplate these learnings and the Back Nine of my life, there are five top intentions that I have. (I really wrestled with what word to use for this. I decided that "resolutions" has too much squandered New Year's baggage, and that "hopes" is too weak. I like "intentions.")

My first intention is to avoid the "Staying Young" trap that has consumed many a mid-lifer. This trap causes us to do things like: get face-lifts, wear ridiculous clothing, ditch a life partner for somebody younger. It is a natural response to try to hold off the inevitable, but it can cause a lot of wreckage in our lives. And really, there's only one thing that can save us from the downward slope of life: an early death. That's not an option I'm anxious to pursue.

Second, I intend to become ever more comfortable in my own skin. I intend to be more confident. I intend to feel less like an imposter. Which isn't to say that I intend to be arrogant or to feel like I will somehow make fewer mistakes or that the blessings in my life are all my doing. I'm going to be easier on myself. I'm going to feel like it's okay that I don't know everything and that I make mistakes.

Third, I intend to take more risks. I intend to live more boldly. No, this doesn't mean I'm going to get a motorcycle or take up sky-diving. Not that there's anything wrong with these pursuits, but they don't call my soul. But I do intend to find paths that call me to venture more often outside my comfort zone. Thus far I've been too cautious, too afraid of making mistakes. As I've shared before, I think this is hard-wired in me. But saying that it's hard-wired doesn't mean that I am powerless to live more boldly.

¹⁰ Kaylan.

One concrete way I intend to live a little more boldly is to be a little more extraverted in my interactions with others. On the Myers-Briggs personality test I am an introvert. Over the past couple decades I have moved more toward the middle—a function, I believe, of the demands of being a minister. I’ve had to do this in order to be effective. I intend to continue this trend. No, I don’t intend to become a raging extrovert—that wouldn’t be me. But I do intend to be less subservient to the fear of rejection and making mistakes that can fuel my introversion.

Fourth, I intend to use the help of role models and guides who have wisdom about life’s second half. This roster of role models and guides includes mythical figures. With apologies to those of you who are sick to death of him, I have to say that one of my mythical guides is Brett Favre. I’m calling him mythical because I understand that in his real life he might not be everything he’s reported to be. But I find a lot in his story that inspires me at this point in my life—including his recent exit from the NFL. So many professional athletes have ignored their biological clocks or tried to turn them back. Not Brett Favre. He had the courage to walk away from a boatload of money and people begging him to play and the sense that he still could play at a high level.

I also admire how Favre has learned to embrace the bad along with the good in life. As has been so well documented, he’s had a lot to deal with in his personal life. It seems like he has done this work well and with a minimum of denial and evasion. I love how the article about him ends in the *Sports Illustrated* issue in which he was named “Sportsman of the Year”:

Ask Favre for his own favorite memory, and he is quiet for a moment. “I’ve got so many plays running through my mind,” he says, finally. “The funny thing is, it’s not only about the touchdowns and the big victories. If I were to make a list, I would include the interceptions, the sacks, the really painful losses. Those times when I’ve been down, when I’ve been kicked around, I hold on to those. In a way those are the best times I’ve ever had, because that’s when I’ve found out who I am. And what I want to be.”¹¹

This sense is why he could walk away from football even though that made the last play of his career a horrendously dumb and poorly thrown pass that snuffed a golden opportunity to play in the Super Bowl. A lot of professional athletes don’t have the maturity to walk away after such a terrible play.

But that play is not the lingering image I have of Favre. My lingering image is a picture of Favre heading for the exits from the Packer offices after that final press conference.¹² A wry smile on his face, he’s waving to the office workers behind him who are clapping. In spite of all the tears he just spilled in front of numerous cameras, you can see that he’s at peace with his decision. He’s ready for the next phase in his life. He’s ready to work through the glories and the demons of middle age, just as he worked through the demons and glories of young adulthood. Though he’s a little younger than I, Brett Favre is a guide.

¹¹ Alan Shipnuck, “Brett Favre: Sportsman of the Year,” *Sports Illustrated*, December 10, 2007, p. 56.

¹² Alan Shipnuck, “Top of His Game,” *Sports Illustrated*, March 17, 2008, p. 62. Photograph by James V. Biever.

And my final intention is this: I intend to enjoy life more. I intend to take off my watch more often. I intend to laugh more. I intend to worry less. I intend to live with more gusto. I intend to enjoy rather than curse the passage of time. I intend to enjoy the ride down.

Here's what another guide, James Taylor, has to say about the downward slope of life's second half:

The secret of life is enjoying the passage of time
Any fool can do it
There ain't nothing to it
Nobody knows how we got to
The top of the hill
But since we're on our way down
We might as well enjoy the ride

The secret of love is in opening up your heart
It's okay to feel afraid
But don't let that stand in your way no
'Cause anyone knows that love is the only road
And since we're only here for a while yeah
Might as well show some style

Give us a smile now
Isn't it a lovely ride
Sliding down
And gliding down
Try not to try too hard
It's just a lovely ride

Now the thing about time is that time
Isn't really real
It's all on your point of view
How does it feel for you
Einstein said that he could never understand it all
Planets spinning through space
The smile upon your face

Welcome to the human race
Isn't that a lovely ride
Sliding down
Gliding down
Try not to try too hard
It's just a lovely ride

Isn't that a lovely ride
Oh mama yes

See me sliding down
And gliding down
Try not to try too hard
It's just a lovely ride

Now the secret of life is enjoying the passage of time¹³

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¹³ <http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/Secret-O'-Life-lyrics-James-Taylor/A4808BD3309266CE482569150023A744>.