



EXCERPT



Marriage in the Middle *Embracing Midlife Surprises, Challenges, and Joys*

September 15, 2020 | \$16, 192 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4829-4

Does midlife have to be synonymous with “crisis” in our marriages? Dorothy Littell Greco normalizes the challenges and surprises of this time frame and comes alongside couples to help them thrive rather than just survive. In sharing vulnerable, personal stories Greco offers hope toward a more fulfilling and robust marriage during a season when couples are pulled in many different directions. Midlife does not have to be a “crisis,” rather it can be a season of opportunity to recalibrate, shore up vulnerabilities, and imagine new possibilities together as a couple.

There Are No Time-Outs in Midlife

Even though the years between forty and sixty-five do not represent the true middle of our lives—few of us will live to one hundred or beyond—midlife is a very real thing. There’s something essential going on that’s worth exploring, particularly as it relates to marriage.

This is a time of multidimensional change. As these shifts alter the landscape of our lives, it can be disturbing and raise more questions than answers. Our disorientation gets exacerbated if strategies and coping mechanisms that previously served us no longer seem to work. When what’s familiar fails, we may find ourselves withdrawing, blaming, or fixating on relational dynamics that we previously overlooked. If any of this resonates with you, rest assured, you’re not alone.

As Christopher and I discovered, the crises that we experience in midlife don’t have to result in unhappiness, dissatisfaction, or isolation. They can help us and our marriages to grow stronger and more fulfilling.

The divergent experiences that we’re being thrust into during midlife can stimulate the kind of character development necessary to prevent us and our marriages from getting stuck or disintegrating. To get the most benefit from these soul-expanding experiences, we have to be willing to admit those places where our marriages are currently fragile or even failing. And of course, an acknowledgement is not enough. We have to address those vulnerabilities with purpose and commitment.

During this season, three qualities become imperative: malleability, resilience, and engagement. These three are not the only attributes that we need to navigate marriage in the middle of life, but they helped Christopher and me to make it through our year from hell.

Malleability fosters transformation. In the physical world, a metal’s malleability is directly related to how much pressure it can withstand without snapping. Midlife is an extended season of pressure. If we’re malleable and allow the circumstances to promote growth, that sustained stress will result in something new and good.

By this point, most of us have reconciled more relational conflicts than paid mediators. We’ve faced unexpected health issues or financial dilemmas. We’ve had to flex and adapt. Repeatedly. Our malleability has actually made us stronger. And hopefully, it has helped us to learn how far we can stretch and what happens when we overextend. When we resist this lesson, it may result in rigidity or cause us to despise the many opportunities that midlife offers us.

Where malleability is the ability to be stretched and changed, resilience determines how quickly we’ll bounce back after something difficult or trying has happened.



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Dorothy Littell Greco is a writer and photographer who lives outside Boston. The author of *Making Marriage Beautiful*, Dorothy and her husband Christopher lead marriage workshops and retreats, speak at conferences nationwide, and have been helping couples create and sustain healthy marriages for over twenty-five years. Dorothy has written for *Christianity Today*, *Relevant*, Missio Alliance, MOPS, Propel Women, Christians for Biblical Equality, *The Perennial Gen*, and *The Mudroom*, and is a member of Redbud Writers' Guild and The Pelican Project. Dorothy has also worked as a professional photo-journalist for more than twenty-five years. Her work brings hope and encouragement to those longing for healing, reconciliation, and joy.

Resilience is one measure of maturity. Children learn to be resilient when they have nurturing, caring parents (or caregivers) who teach them how to rebound after they've made mistakes or suffered losses. Even if you lacked those necessary ingredients when you were growing up, you can still become resilient by cultivating supportive relationships, choosing hope, and refusing to see yourself as a powerless victim.

Health issues, the loss of our parents, shifts in our employment or income will all knock the wind out of us. But there's no stopping the clock or taking time-outs in midlife. Our world might be shaken and our ego deeply bruised. We might even forget all the things we've actually done well. But after we've had a good cry and caught our breath, we have to get up and get back in the game because our spouses and our families need us.

Malleability and resilience presuppose that we're engaged. Engagement means paying attention and remaining actively involved. The antithesis of engagement is passivity, withdrawal, or apathy. None of those antistrategies work well when the stakes are high. It seems to me that the stakes keep getting raised in this season. Even if what we've been doing has worked fairly well up to this point, we can't assume it's going to work tomorrow.

The challenges of this time frame require us to be present in every sphere. If we're parents, our children don't need less of us as they get older; they need us in different capacities. After needing us peripherally or perhaps not at all for most of their lives, our parents will increasingly turn toward us for emotional, practical, and spiritual support. Because of the chaotic nature of midlife, our spouses will continue to turn to us for comfort and reassurance. And during the brief moments when our lives are peaceful and conflict free, chances are that's not the case for someone in our friendship circles.

Becoming more malleable, resilient, and engaged won't simply help us to be better people: they may actually prevent marital failure.

—Adapted from chapter one, "The Paradox of Midlife Marriage: Crisis or Opportunity?"



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