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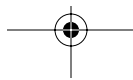
The Discoveries of Midlife

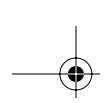


John took a watercolor painting class when he was 50. Now, three years later, he finds that he looks at the world differently. When he sees towering clouds, bright on top and stormy gray at the bottom, he thinks about how he could paint the darkness and the light. He looks at trees, flowers and mundane household objects intently, noticing the variation in color and the effect of shadows.

As he observes all these details in the physical world, he feels close to God, the Creator of everything he sees. When he paints, whether he's alone or with a friend, he experiences an intense joy. That kind of joy was missing from his life throughout the decade of his forties.

John was 43 when he reached his career goal of tenure at a large university. Things went downhill from there. He had thought tenure





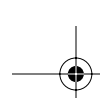
would earn him the respect of his peers, but they seemed just as indifferent to his opinion as they had before his promotion. He hadn't realized that his department chair had been protecting him from onerous assignments for several years so he could do research to get tenure. After the big tenure event, his chair piled on him countless boring committee assignments and organizational tasks within the department.

He spent the next few years agonizing about his work, considering leaving the university, but continually returning to the strong sense of call from God he had experienced when he began to teach. He didn't see how he could possibly leave the university when he knew God had called him to teaching. Yet the lack of collegiality with his peers continued to get worse, John became depressed, and his wife got irritated with his continual complaining about work. His kids entered adolescence and stunned John with their bursts of self-absorption and rudeness. Life was absolutely no fun at all, and he had no idea how to receive guidance from God in the midst of the darkness and numbness inside him.

Finally John realized he had to get out of teaching or his whole life would collapse. At 46, he began his own business, working endless hours to get on his feet. Finally, when he was 50, things were established well enough so that he could cut back his work hours. He began to exercise again. He took up weight lifting and finds great satisfaction in his newfound strength. His kids are mostly out of the nest, and he and his wife have a wonderful time exploring parks and eating in new restaurants. He became a deacon in his congregation and finds joy in serving people in need.

And he draws and paints. His absorption with shape, color and light gives him an almost mystical connection with God that he has never experienced before. When he sketches or paints, he is creating alongside the Creator.



**Finding**

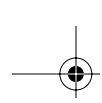
Midlife is all about coping with loss and uncertainty, as we saw in the first chapter. John certainly had his share of loss. He had to let go of the dream that he would be a world-class teacher, appreciated by students and colleagues alike. He had to relinquish his sense of call to teaching, and he had to look for God's guidance into new areas. Like most parents of adolescents, he had to let go of the dream that his children would respect and admire him every moment of their lives. Both of his parents died when he was in his late forties, trying to get his business established. Even though he was almost 50, a grown-up responsible adult, he felt acutely the loss of his parents and the vulnerability of not having in his family a generation older than himself.

John's story illustrates that during the midlife years we not only have to learn to face losses, we also get to experience the surprise of finding new pleasures, new joys and new ways of connecting with God. John's zestful enjoyment of painting and drawing parallels the experience of many midlife folks who take up creative writing, quilting, sewing, woodworking, gardening and dozens of other creative endeavors.

John had always been good at drawing, and he had frequently drawn sketches for handouts in his university classes. He had always wanted to learn to paint, so his foray into watercolors fulfilled an old dream that had been in the back of his mind all his life. This, too, is common at midlife. Many people revive a dream or rediscover a passion from much earlier in their lives.

John's new involvement as a deacon illustrates another common midlife experience: finding new avenues of service. Some of these new avenues may be the fulfillment of a dream from long ago, but they also may be completely fresh, different and unexpected. Whether it's playing with kids in the church nursery or repairing hiking trails, a new and different place to serve can emerge at midlife and bring great joy.





Many folks find new and intense pleasure in the physical world. This may involve sheer enjoyment of creation, in part like John's experience of intense analysis when he looks at clouds, trees and flowers. It may take the form of a new expression with the physical body. John's pleasure in his increasing strength and visible muscles is a common experience during the midlife years. Dancing, walking, hiking, biking and kayaking are forms of exercise that midlife people frequently describe with enthusiasm.

John's almost mystical experience of God through the visual beauty of creation parallels the experience of many. God is indeed knowable in Jesus Christ, yet God also dwells in unimaginable glory and majesty. At midlife, many find themselves more connected with the wonder and mystery of God. We don't have to understand everything about God in order to worship; in fact, as we get older we



A Quickening of Reverence

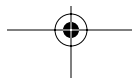
The task in this transition is not only psychological; it is also spiritual. There is a quickening of reverence in the presence of art and nature, as almost everyone begins to wonder where he or she might fit in the larger scheme of things. We sense that time is growing short and there is no use waiting to settle old scores. It's time to forgive the erring parent, embrace the estranged sibling, let go of disappointments in the prodigal child. Religious faith may be reconsidered or renewed.

GAIL SHEEHY, *New Passages*



become more aware that we cannot possibly understand everything about God's ways and God's power. At midlife, many find themselves comforted by the increasing awareness of just how huge and awesome God is.

In this chapter, we will explore the variety of ways people at midlife find new pleasures, new challenges and new ways of experiencing God.





The Physical World

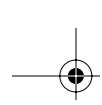
Psalm 19 has taken on increased significance for me at midlife. “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork,” writes the psalmist. “Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge” (Ps 19:1-2). It is amazing the way the creation speaks to me in new ways about God’s glory. I so easily find myself praying along with these words from Psalm 104: “O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures” (Ps 104:24). The reds and pinks of sunsets, the blazing fall leaves, the tender greens of spring, the shape of a tree silhouetted against the bright winter sky . . . for me and for many people at midlife, all of these seem rich and endowed with meaning in a way they never have before.

A significant number of people find themselves surprised at the way their own creative activities help them feel connected to God the Creator. For many of the people who talked with me about midlife, new creative outlets have emerged in their late thirties and forties, and these activities have an unexpected spiritual significance.

I was 39 when I began writing fiction. It took me almost a year to write my first short story, but the next several stories came pretty quickly. I then wrote a short novel and several longer ones. By the time I was in my mid-forties, I had switched to nonfiction book writing, and I actually found success in having my writing published.

I sometimes wonder if I will ever return to fiction writing, but whether or not I do, I will never forget the exhilaration of those first few years of writing stories. I felt I was creating right alongside God, who created the universe out of nothing. I was creating stories using words that I had no hand in creating, but the characters and the plots came out of nowhere. I had dreamed them up myself, just like God dreamed up the universe. I don’t know why that experience was so powerful and awesome, but I do know that many other people have described similar feelings connected with creative activities.





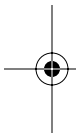
One of my friends makes beautiful scrapbooks of family photos. Another finds great pleasure in decorating her home and planning new fences and flower beds for her yard. Someone else makes quilted wall hangings. Another friend writes poetry. I know a social worker who finds balance for his intense work through making beautiful furniture in his workshop. For many, these creative endeavors enable a connection with God the Creator in new ways.

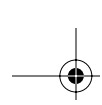
Physical exercise is another way in which people at midlife experience connection with God the Creator. Quite a few folks told me the ways they have been surprised at the feeling of spiritual significance they have experienced as they have learned to use their bodies in new ways.

At 37, Carrie began to participate in dance lessons. She learned a kind of modern dance in which a variety of emotions are expressed by the body. As a very verbal and insightful person, she had always enjoyed talking with people about emotions. She found a new kind of insight and freedom in the nonverbal expression of emotions through dance.

At 46, Rea has also begun to take dance classes, in her case ballroom dance. After a difficult divorce and many years in banking, Rea realized she lives almost entirely in the cognitive realm. The ballroom dancing enables her to meet people, but most important, she is beginning to get reconnected to her body in a way that she hasn't experienced since she was a child. God made us as physical beings, and the rediscovery of the joy of physical expression is part of midlife for many folks.

My mother took up both golf and downhill skiing in her forties, and now, in her seventies, she continues to participate enthusiastically in both. She loves getting outside in the sun and wind, seeing the beauty of the snow in the mountains and the variety in weather and seasons on the golf course. She is a wonderful model of the truth that at midlife one of our tasks is to discover patterns of living that will





The Discoveries of Midlife ————— 39

endure through the second half of our lives and give us pleasure, joy and connection with God in new ways.

Unfulfilled Dreams

Rob, in his mid-forties, has a ponytail. He's been growing it for a couple of years and it continues to get longer. He can't bring himself to cut it off because he has always dreamed of having a ponytail. He just never got around to it until he reached his forties.

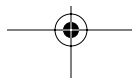
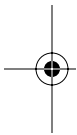
Rob's hair may seem a trivial example of a long-held dream that has finally come to life, but he gets a real kick out of it. His long hair represents something significant to him—a commitment to be a little different from his culture and the people around him.

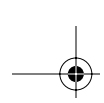
Perhaps a part of Rob's enthusiasm for his long hair comes from a realization that hits so many people in their forties. We realize that if we don't begin to pursue our dreams now, we will never get around to them. In our twenties and early thirties, we usually feel that we have all the time in the world. In our forties and fifties, as we face the fact that we will one day die—one of the losses most midlife folks find themselves acknowledging. We realize that our time on earth is finite and we need to start pursuing those old dreams.

Many of the creative endeavors or physical activities that people take up during the midlife years are indeed a fulfillment of an earlier dream. Changing careers, going back to school, adopting a child or having a baby, taking up golf, providing day care for a grandchild, traveling overseas, learning to play the piano . . . all of these activities have been described to me as the fulfillment of a long-held dream, and all can be deeply meaningful, true gifts from God.

The Fruits of Turning Inward

At midlife many people report increased joy in being alone. This can take the form of quiet devotional activities, such as journaling, establishing a place to pray in the home, walking alone and praying, observ-





ing the Sabbath in quiet, or praying quietly in an empty church. Many midlife folks find increased joy in being alone in the home doing domestic tasks or reading. The intent of those activities is not prayer, yet a spirit of companionship with God may be more common than ever before.

The turn inward that is so common at midlife also often manifests itself as increased desire to think about our lives. *Have I made the most of my life so far? Did I accomplish what I set out to do? What changes do I need to make as I move into the second half of life?*

As we saw in the first chapter, so many of the illusions of the first half of life are falling away. It becomes clear that we may never be as

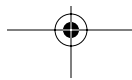
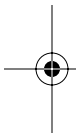
A Garden Within Me

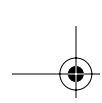
Like the children [in the film The Secret Garden] discovering a much-neglected place of beauty, in midlife I had found a garden within me that needed attention and was not beginning to bloom. Like the children, I had found the key to this place and had given much inner work to weeding and planting. When the flowers in the film began to bloom, I felt those flowers come to life inside of me. They gave me a huge sense of hope and promise, confirming the value of my midlife journey as a source of personal transformation.

JOYCE RUPP, *Dear Heart, Come Home*

successful or as beautiful as we imagined. *This is my life, I find myself thinking, and it's the only life I'm going to get. How can I make the most of it?*

Often people in their forties and fifties begin to drop the masks that have hid their true selves for the first half of life. This comes about in part because of the many questions about meaning and value that arise at midlife. We may realize that desperately trying to make a good impression is no longer as important to us as when we were younger. Dropping masks can help us experience greater honesty in prayer and in conversations. We can find increased peace with God and increased acceptance of who we are.





The Discoveries of Midlife ————— 41

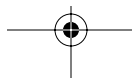
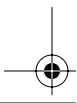
Julia has vivid memories of the church of her childhood. She believes that masks were continually encouraged by a general attitude that everything negative needed to be covered up. She learned to put on a cheerful, superficially content expression at all times.

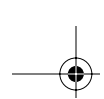
Midlife has brought many questions for Julia. As she has turned inward in prayer and reflection, she has found great growth in the discipline of trying to be honest with God. Exercising this discipline year after year in her forties, she has begun to experience peace with God and openness with her family and friends in a way she never experienced before. It has taken a lot of commitment and work for Julia to embrace honesty. It definitely doesn't come naturally to her. But the fruits have been life-giving.

One of the many paradoxes of midlife is connected to this turn inward that is so common at midlife: the simultaneous growth of independence and interdependence. As they focus more on their inner life and experience more contentment in being alone, midlife folks often find an increased sense of independence and confidence in who they are. They find resilience and strength in themselves that surprises them. At the same time, they are growing in their awareness of the ways we need support and care from the people around us. We are not lonely planets; we are part of a web of interconnected relationships.

Julia couldn't have grown at midlife without the support group she has participated in for the past few years. The group has nurtured her in her desire to grow in honesty with God as she faced childhood pain and disillusionment. The women in the group have loved her, shared their own pain with her, prayed with her and given her the opportunity to support them as they supported her. Yet she finds strength and independence in herself in new ways as she receives healing from God and as she grows in honesty with God.

Independence and interdependence—surprising simultaneous fruits of growth and discovery in the midlife years.





The Paradoxes of Midlife

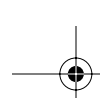
Many people at midlife experience a new sense of the balance of opposites in their lives. Work and rest, time alone and time with people, a growing sense of freedom coupled with a greater commitment to discipline . . . all of these are reported by people at midlife with a bemused sense of humor and irony. Life is full of paradox. Just at the moment when we think we know ourselves, we discover something that feels totally new as we undertake a new job. Just when we feel the most settled and even a little bored in our family life, a totally new path of service lights up our lives.

John had been asked to serve as a deacon in his church off and on throughout his thirties and forties. By the time he finally said yes, he had turned 50. He loves almost everything about being a deacon. It suits his gifts of service and compassion very well. Sometimes he regrets that he didn't agree to be deacon earlier, but he remembers those years of struggling to get his career established while raising young children. He had enough on his plate in those years.

Certainly some people in their forties and even fifties have young children and time-consuming careers. Many people, however, are beginning to have time for new pursuits for the first time in many years. An increased sense of self-knowledge and self-acceptance, coupled with a spirit of adventure, also flows into new patterns of service. Many are surprised at the sense of discovery and joy that they find as they experiment. In her forties, my mother began to volunteer with hospice. Several decades later, she's still involved with hospice and feels deep gratitude for all she has learned there.

Many at midlife make career changes and find that same sense of discovery and joy—in the midst of a great deal of hard work—in their new career choices. In his forties, a pastor leaves the ministry and becomes an AIDS educator. Another person in his forties sells his public relations firm and goes to work for a relief and development agency. A high school teacher enters a Ph.D. program in her forties





The Discoveries of Midlife ————— 43

and becomes a college professor. Each of these people talks with energy and enthusiasm about the choice to try something new.

At the same time, the complexity of life at midlife requires a new look at rest and recreation. As fatigue—from such diverse causes as insomnia, increased stress, teenage kids' late nights—becomes more of a constant companion, the necessity for conscious choices around rest becomes more significant.

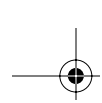
Jan, a very social and energetic nurse, began to observe the Sabbath in her forties. She takes one day each week to be alone, spending time reading, praying, thinking and just being. For the first forty years of her life, she could sustain her high-energy lifestyle with lots of contacts with family and friends, but after 40 she began to find she could no longer go at full speed seven days each week.

The benefits of Jan's Sabbath observance go deeper than just physical rest. She realizes that her pattern of life at a fast pace had elements of compulsiveness. As she has taken more time to rest from work and social commitments, she has found she is more able to rest in God. She is more able to affirm that God loves us for who we are, not what we do.

In the midst of constant activity, we may give cognitive assent to the truth that God loves us for who we are, but it is very difficult to believe that truth on a deep level if we are terrifically busy doing things all the time. The development of consistent patterns of rest can help us relax into the truth of God's love for us. We grow in our ability to simply rest in God.

So this is another of the rich paradoxes of midlife growth. At the same time as we grow in finding work and service that are meaningful and that connect more with who we are, we may also grow in our willingness to embrace the necessity for rest. We will act out, in a more healthy manner, the tension between being and doing. Who we are and what we do will become more integrated and connected. The rewards of rest—the ability to know we are loved by God for who we





are—will spill over into work and service. This is a great and wonderful gift.

Knowledge and Mystery

“I’m not sure of very much any more,” says Kate, 47. “The upheavals of the past decade—deaths in the family, argumentative teenagers, career changes—have shaken me up. I still know God loves me and still believe that love is the center of everything. But I used to be so sure of so many things. On my best days, I’m content to let God be in charge, content to rest in his control and authority. I just don’t have to know and understand everything.”

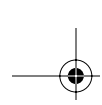
Kate is not alone in feeling less certain about many things than she used to feel in her twenties and early thirties. All of us see how complex life is at every level; for lots of things there are no answers. And many midlife folks report increased awareness of the mystery behind what we know of God. So much of what God does and who God is lies beyond our understanding.

Yet we can know God in Jesus Christ, and we can take comfort in his care, provision and protection. This tension between knowledge and mystery is yet one more paradox that can provoke the questioning which is common at midlife. This paradox can also enable people to find a peace they never knew before, as they learn wonder and awe. God is so much bigger than we can describe or imagine. We learn to take our place as dependent creatures and beloved children.

This ability to embrace mystery connects with the other areas of discovery that we have discussed in this chapter. In the midlife years we may begin to experience in new ways God’s presence in creation and in creative endeavors. How is God present in the creation? We don’t have to understand it all; it is enough to acknowledge the reality that God feels present there for us as we enjoy his physical world and as we engage in creative activities.

This awareness of mystery enables us to face our past more realis-





tically. We won't know everything that motivated our parents and the other key people in our lives. We can't possibly understand everything that ever happened to us. It is enough to know that God cares about all our past pain. It is enough that God is our healer who helps us live each day and who holds us in the palm of his hand.

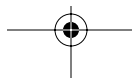
At midlife, faith becomes much more than a list of statements to believe. As we focus more on our relationship with the knowable yet unknowable God, we need time alone to reflect, ponder and pray. The drive to turn inward, so common at midlife, nurtures and is nurtured by this growing awareness of mystery. The sense of mystery calls us to be quiet in rest and awe in God's presence. The more we do that, the more aware we are of mystery.

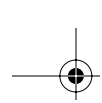
The tension between being and doing also feeds into this sense of mystery. God calls us to rest and abide in him as our highest calling. Yet he also calls us to a life of obedience and service. How can these both be true at once? At midlife we embrace more deeply the rhythms of life that call us to service and rest at different times—each at the right time.

Rest, peace, simplicity, joy . . . all these are more real as we grow in our ability to slow down and quietly embrace the mystery that exists in God, who is knowable in Jesus Christ and yet dwells in splendor beyond our imagining.

Fresh Paths

The natural pattern during all our lives is to learn new things and grow in new ways. This growing and learning are often intensified during the midlife years, because during those years people often find themselves evaluating the first half of their lives as they prepare to enter the second half. Reevaluation naturally lends itself to experimentation, discovery and new joys. In this chapter we've seen a small sampling of the many creative outlets and fresh paths that people discover at midlife: watercolor painting, dancing, writing fiction, being in





a support group, keeping the Sabbath and enjoying the Creator's handiwork.

Some of the new patterns of connection with God will happen spontaneously. A friend invites Ken to attend an exercise class. It

The Beauty of Aging

The Japanese have an adjective for the beauty of aging: shibui. We have no comparable word in English to capture the distinctive character revealed with age. We find it in the contrast between young saplings and old trees in a forest. The shapes of young . . . trees are straight and symmetrical, often so similar that they are indistinguishable. Old trees, bearing the furrows and scars of centuries, have a unique beauty. There are no two alike.

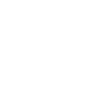
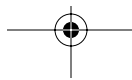
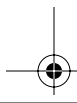
KATHLEEN FISCHER, *Autumn Gospel*

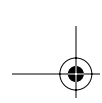


feels good to stretch his muscles regularly. After a year he realizes that he feels more at home in his body than ever before. Ken senses God's pleasure in the way God made him. Ken feels healthier and more energetic, which he experiences as a gift from God. Ken finds himself walking through his neighborhood more often, praying as he walks. He has fallen into a new habit that works well for him, one that nurtures his spiritual life in unexpected ways. It happened without a lot of effort or intentional choice from him.

Like Ken, we may find ourselves "falling into" fruitful new habits. In addition, we can consciously and deliberately choose to experiment with new patterns of spiritual discipline. Midlife is a natural time for experimentation, as we are drawn to consider how to navigate the second half of life.

I want to encourage a spirit of lightness and humor as we experiment. Let's consider Susan, who can sense herself longing for more silence and quiet in her life, so she starts attending contemplative prayer events. She tries to learn the various patterns of contemplative prayer and strives to look for the hand of God in her life through





quiet prayer. She tries to meditate on the Scriptures. She tries hard. Really hard.

But nothing happens. She still finds her most significant connection with God in the structured Bible study she attends every week. She just doesn't experience anything when she tries contemplative prayer.

But one day she wanders in a quilt exhibit, and she decides to study quilting. She goes to exhibits of quilts, reads books on quilting, and begins to sew a small quilt. She finds new joy and creativity in fabric stores, looking at all the beautiful colors, textures, and designs in fabric. When she sees a beautifully made quilt, she marvels at the creativity of the person who made it, paralleling the creativity of the one Creator. She begins to experiment with quilt designs herself, and senses herself creating alongside the Creator.

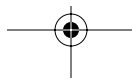
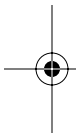
Not everyone will thrive with contemplative prayer, and not everyone experiences God's creativity in a fabric store! Maybe for you God will be present in a new way on the golf course, in a twelve-step group, in a structured Bible study class, or as you serve in the food bank. But how will we find these new ways to connect with God unless we experiment?

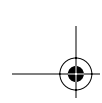
I long for Christians to embrace an attitude that encourages exploration and expectation. This attitude is vitally important at midlife, so we can find the freshness we crave. We have lived a couple of decades of adult life, full of hard work, challenges, disappointments and accomplishments. Now is the time to experiment with new patterns of spiritual practice, so we can grow closer to God in fresh, new ways.

Questions for Reflection

To think about, write about or talk about with friends.

1. Think back on the past two or three years. What have you done or experienced that has been new or different? What have you enjoyed in those new things? What have you learned? What has been





challenging about the new things? Spend some time thanking God for new things and praying about the challenges.

2. Finish this sentence: "I've always dreamed of . . ." Is there any way you could act on that dream?

3. Think of the various hobbies and activities of people you know. Have you ever experienced envy of any of those activities? Could you try any of those things?

For Further Reading

Bob Buford. *Half Time: Changing Your Game Plan from Success to Significance*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994.

Kathleen Fischer. *Autumn Gospel: Women in the Second Half of Life*. New York: Paulist, 1995.

Joyce Rupp. *Dear Heart, Come Home: The Path of Midlife Spirituality*. New York: Crossroad, 1997.

Gail Sheehy. *New Passages: Mapping Your Life Across Time*. New York: Ballantine, 1995.

