

Faithlink

Connecting Faith and Life



Rethinking Midlife

In her recent book *Life Reimagined: The Science, Art, and Opportunity of Midlife*, Barbara Bradley Hagerty asks readers to rethink the “midlife crisis.” Proposed by psychoanalyst Elliott Jaques in 1965 and popularized by journalist Gail Sheehy in her 1976 bestseller *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life*, the midlife crisis has entrenched itself in the popular imagination. The phrase is shorthand for the anxiety people supposedly face when mortality confronts them and they realize (in an image attributed to Joseph Campbell) the ladder they’ve been climbing their whole lives is leaning against the wrong wall.

But as Hagerty points out in an interview to promote her book, researchers from the 1990’s on have failed to find evidence of a “common or inevitable midlife crisis,” and as few as ten percent of men actually suffer this “existential angst about aging.” She encourages readers to reframe midlife as a time marked by “optimism and renewal, happiness and growth.”

According to the psalm-singer, “The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong” (**Psalm 90:10**, NRSV). This biblical estimate’s upper limit is now the *average* American life expectancy—78.8 years, reports the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And a Pew Research report in 2009 found that 79 percent of Americans say “old age” begins at 85. Our lengthening lifespans demand we reconsider what “midlife” means, as well as what to expect from and make of it.

Midlife Markers

Midlife confronts us with many changes. Some of the most obvious are physical. Our bodies start showing the wear and tear of being alive, from graying hair to creeping weight gain (see the sidebar on page 3). We can choose—as my doctor said when I visited for a checkup around my 40th birthday—to see midlife as the time “when our bodies begin to betray us.”

Recent psychological research suggests the commonly accepted “midlife crisis” is a myth. What are the transitional realities of midlife?

What challenges and opportunities do these decades present? How do Christians navigate midlife in faithful ways?

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Core Bible Passages

Ecclesiastes 12:1-7 presents a bleak picture of old age. “The Teacher” (**verse 8**) whose wisdom this book preserves presents image after vivid image of decay and death. Many are metaphors for our failing physical and emotional faculties. A sense of terror in the face of mortality pervades the passage. It reinforces the Teacher’s exhortation to remember God in the prime of life, “before the days of trouble arrive” (**verse 1**).

What were the latter years for Ecclesiastes are the middle years for most Americans today, and we no longer need view old age as an inevitably slow, painful decline; however, the Teacher’s reminder that our time is finite remains important. The only guaranteed opportunity we have to respond to God is *now*.

We see a more positive picture of maturity in **Proverbs 4:1-9**. A father in the prime of his life is instructing his children in the pursuit of wisdom, just as his father instructed him.

As we grow through our middle years, we can remember that we have knowledge and experience that can benefit those younger than we are. We can offer insights into how we have succeeded *and* failed in getting wisdom—in living in alignment with God’s will—in our lives.

Midlife also brings mental changes. Our fluid intelligence—our capacity to recognize new patterns and solve new problems—peaks in our 20’s. “Certain capabilities fall off as you approach 50,” writes Patricia Cohen, author of *In Our Prime: The Invention of Middle Age*, in *The New York Times*. “Memories of where you left the keys or parked the car mysteriously vanish. Words suddenly go into hiding as you struggle to remember the guy, you know, in that movie, what was it called? And calculating the tip on your dinner check seems to take longer than it used to.”

Emotional challenges also confront many people during midlife. Parents may die. Children may move away. Jobs may end. Spouses may leave. No one’s circumstances remain exactly the same through life, and significant life changes naturally create stress. But does midlife stress constitute a “crisis” or something less perilous and more promising?

The U-curve

While true crises seem rare, midlife’s physical, mental, and emotional changes often do breed dissatisfaction. As Hagerty says, “Midlife *ennui*—that flat feeling, that perpetual question: is this all there is?—that feeling is practically universal.”

In the 1990’s, economists researching correlations between work and happiness discovered a recurring, worldwide pattern. Journalist Jonathan Rauch summarized the findings for *The Atlantic*: “Life satisfaction would decline with age for the first couple of decades of adulthood, bottom out somewhere in the 40s or early 50s, and then, until the very last years, increase with age, often (though not always) reaching a higher level than in young adulthood. The pattern came to be known as the happiness U-curve.”

The U-curve doesn’t describe everyone’s experience. In low-income nations, for example, people tend to remain dissatisfied throughout life. But the curve has manifested itself frequently enough that it may provide some comfort to people who feel frustrated or disappointed during their middle years. Some midlife unhappiness may simply be, as economist Carol Graham calls it, “a statistical regularity. Something about the human condition.” Whether we experience it as a “crisis” may be mostly up to us.

“True Adulthood”

In a 2012 British survey, almost one in five respondents said, “Being middle age is a state of mind.” Such sentiment mirrors growing consensus among experts that the concept of midlife, despite real changes in the middle years, is not a helpful social construct.

As do many mental health professionals, psychotherapist Douglas LaBier, Ph.D., writing for *Psychology Today*’s website, suggests instead that people “think of a broad period of true adulthood”: a span of several decades, beginning in the 30’s, in which

Physical Changes

No medically definitive start and end dates for middle age exist, but changes generally associated with it are well-documented.

- Our hair starts graying. “About half of 50-year-olds are at least 50 percent gray,” reports *The New York Times*. Moreover, we may lose more of it since the scalp’s ability to make hair follicles diminishes (and not only among men).

- Our skin starts wrinkling. “After the age of 20,” dermatology professor Suzan Obagi tells *Scientific American*, “a person produces about 1 percent less collagen in the skin each year. As a result, the skin becomes thinner and more fragile with age.”

- Our eyesight changes. The American Optometric Association identifies changes in the ability to focus, shifts in color perception, and reduced tear production as some “common age-related vision changes” in adults age 40 to 60.

- Our weight stays with us longer. “Your metabolism slows by 5 percent each decade,” Madelyn Fernstrom, Ph.D., of the University of Pittsburgh tells *Good Housekeeping*. “Do nothing, and you could gain eight to 12 pounds a year.”

- Women face additional challenges in midlife, from menopause (the average age among US women is 51) to increased risk of osteoporosis (women’s smaller bones and estrogen reduction mean they lose bone mass more rapidly).

“men and women face a range of truly adult challenges” and “grapple with the challenge to ‘evolve’ into a fully adult human—emotionally, creatively, relationally, and spiritually.”

This perspective enlarges rather than restricts our present and future. We can treat the middle years’ changes and challenges not as “midlife crises” to impulsively indulge or passively endure, but rather as opportunities for growth:

- We can acknowledge our physical limitations without resigning ourselves to decay. “Studies show that while there is some drop in muscle mass as you age,” Hagerty wrote for NPR, “you can slow those changes to a crawl by getting your heart rate up a few times a week.”

- We can admit our fluid intelligence flows less freely but take confidence knowing our crystallized intelligence—our ability to solve new problems by applying old, learned knowledge—can keep growing into our 70’s. Older adults possess “a wealth of experiences that tend to support superior reasoning and judgment abilities,” writes University of Minnesota assistant professor David Crawford, “if given time to think and reflect on the learning activity.”

- We can use the life changes we experience to refine or even reinvent our sense of self. Marriage and family therapist Joan Sherman writes about counseling a woman who spent a week sleeping and crying when her children left home for college. “You’re not losing your identity,” Sherman told her. “You have an opportunity to create a new one.” In consultation with a college career center, the woman began to explore doing just that.

Maturing in Wisdom and Years

According to author, speaker, and leadership development coach Amy Kay Watson, “Most North Americans reaching midlife (or later) would rather pursue a scenario in which they own their choices more than they’ve been doing. That doesn’t mean reverting to the impulses and desires of a 17 year old. . . . The adults I have worked with far prefer to get clear on their personal values and start making sure those are present in their lives.”

The quest to clarify values and fully own one’s choices strikes me as a way of living wisely. Several authors suggest wisdom is the goal of the middle years. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, for instance, views midlife as “the moment when you can look back on your life so far and see it with different eyes. . . . You might have enough clarity by now to orient your life around a true north on some ultimate horizon.”

For Christians, the call of midlife is a particular expression of the general call God always sounds: to mature “in wisdom and years, and in favor with God and with people,” as Jesus did (**Luke 2:52**). Jesus saw with clarity the horizon to which his values and choices would lead. While few, if any, of us will find our midlife journeys leading toward self-sacrificial physical death, we may

Best Practices

Midlife challenges our bodies, minds, and spirits in many ways. Here are some basic “best practices” for coping with and capitalizing on the changes of the middle years:

- In midlife, our metabolism starts to slow, and our muscles begin to lose mass. “You need both [cardiovascular] and strength training,” Dr. Ken Kim told PBS, “but given a choice between the two, I’d opt for strength training . . . because we lose 1 percent of muscle every year after age 45. . . . Plus, when you do cardio you don’t get strength training benefits, but when you do strength training you get some cardiovascular benefit; your heart rate goes up when you lift weights.” (Always consult with your physician before starting a new exercise plan.)

- Ongoing education can help keep the mind sharp in the middle years. “Regular mental workouts can actually alter the brain’s neural circuits in middle-age and older adults,” journalist Patricia Cohen reports, “making regions like the hippocampus, a center for memory and learning, more responsive.”

- Social interaction is also critical in maximizing midlife quality. According to the University of Rochester Medical Center, keeping your social interactions strong as you age not only brings the obvious benefit of making life more interesting, but it also potentially reduces your risks for cardiovascular disease, depression, and Alzheimer’s disease.

need to sacrifice long-held ideas about who we are and what we are supposed to do. Like the single grain of wheat falling to the ground (**John 12:24**), we may need to “die” in order to live wisely and well for the days of this life we have left.

May the psalm-singer’s prayer be ours, in midlife and always: “Teach us to number our days so we can have a wise heart” (**Psalm 90:12**).

United Methodist Perspective

The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, 2012 affirms the aging process as “part of God’s plan for life” and “the mystery of God’s involvement in the person of Jesus Christ” as “a unique source of divine help (grace) in our passage through life’s successive stages. This is especially significant in the later stages, when spiritual maturation and well-being can be experienced even in times of physical decline” (Resolution 3022, “Aging in the United States: The Church’s Response”).

The Reverend Scott Sharp is one who could testify to God’s grace “even in times of physical decline.” A United Methodist minister, Sharp was facing poor health at age 44, accompanied by a spiritual crisis. He addressed these challenges by training for an Ironman triathlon (a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bike ride, and a full marathon in 17 hours, maximum). He competed in and completed the 2012 Texas Ironman. He later told United Methodist News, “One of the things I figured out . . . was that if I’m not dead yet, then what am I alive for? That’s been a great question to wrestle with as a pastor, as a dad and a husband. Is what I’m doing meaningful? Is it making a difference? Is it effecting change? Is it transforming the world for Jesus Christ?”

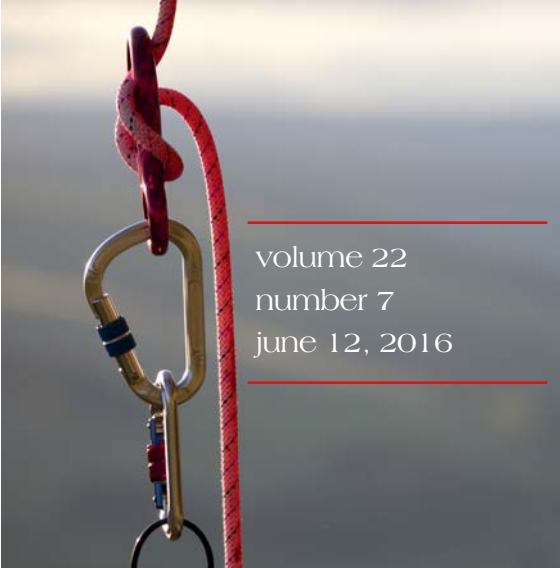
Helpful Links

- Jonathan Rauch writes in-depth about the happiness U-curve at <http://tiny.cc/256tby>.
- Read Amy Kay Watson’s blog post “Can a Person of Faith Have a Midlife Crisis?” at <http://tiny.cc/e66tby>.

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Connecting Faith and Life

Renegotiating Midlife

How do Christians navigate midlife in faithful ways?

CREATE Your Teaching Plan

Keeping in mind your group members and your group time, choose from among the OPEN, EXPLORE, and CLOSE activities or from “Teaching Alternatives” to plan the session.

OPEN the Session

Pray Together

O God, you have carried us from birth and brought us to this day, and you promise to support us until we grow old—and beyond. May your Holy Spirit now guide our listening and learning, our reading and reflection, that we may discern how to follow you faithfully our whole lives long, always growing as disciples of your Son, the Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Identify Midlife Crisis Clichés

Ask: What immediately comes to mind when you hear the phrase *midlife crisis*? Write participants’ responses on a markerboard or large sheet of paper. Prompt participants to recall any depictions of midlife crises they’ve seen in movies or TV shows. Ask: What are our culture’s attitudes toward the concept of a midlife crisis? How are these attitudes like or unlike your own?

EXPLORE the Topic

Rethink the Limits of Midlife

Have participants write down the age at which they think “old age” begins. When all have done so, invite them to read their answers aloud. Find the average age at which your group thinks old age begins (add the numbers and divide by number of responses).

Read or review “Rethinking Midlife.” Ask: How do you think the lengthening life span of Americans shapes our society’s perceptions of midlife today?

Illustrate Ecclesiastes 12:1-7

You will need blank paper; pens, pencils, markers, or crayons; and magazines and newspapers.

Have participants turn in their Bibles to Ecclesiastes 12:1-7. Recruit a volunteer to read the passage aloud. Ask: How would you describe the attitude toward aging expressed in this text? Invite participants to illustrate phrases or images from the text that grab their attention, either by sketching pictures on pieces of paper or choosing appropriate pictures from magazines and newspapers. Invite volunteers to present their illustrations. Ask: Do you share this attitude about getting older? Why or why not?

Consider Physical Changes

Read or review highlights of “Physical Changes.” Ask: How do you respond to this list of changes? What feelings or thoughts do you have? What steps, if any, are you taking to deal with these changes?

Identify Midlife Markers

Read or review “Midlife Markers.” Form three teams of participants. Assign each team one of the areas of midlife changes addressed in the essay (physical, mental, emotional). Ask each team to identify additional “midlife markers” within their assigned

category. After sufficient time for discussion, have each team report to the whole group. Ask: How might we begin thinking of midlife as “less perilous and more promising”?

Consider the Happiness U-curve

Read or review “The U-curve.” Ask: Does your experience of life match the U-curve? What about the experience of other people you know? How helpful do you think knowing about this recurring pattern would be to someone who’s feeling dissatisfied during their middle years, and why?

Discuss Midlife Challenges

Read or review “True Adulthood” and the sidebar “Best Practices.” Have participants reassemble in their three small teams to brainstorm and discuss other ways to meet the physical, mental, and emotional challenges of the middle years in positive and productive ways. As before, ask each team to present highlights of its discussion to the whole group. Ask: What specific challenges of your middle years are you finding/did you find the most pressing? What are you doing/what did you do to meet those challenges? What are/were the results? Do you agree or disagree with the respondents in the British survey who said being middle-aged is a mindset? Why or why not? How helpful or unhelpful is the concept of midlife today, and why?

Reflect on “United Methodist Perspective”

Read or review highlights of this section. Ask: How do you respond to the material in this section? How does it inspire or challenge you? What does it suggest to you about the church and its ministry to people who are in the midlife years?

Discuss “Maturing in Wisdom and Years”

Read or review “Maturing in Wisdom and Years.” Ask: How are you taking greater ownership of your life choices at this point in your life? What would you say is the “true north” around which you orient your life? What “long-held ideas about who [you] are and what [you] are supposed to do” have been challenged by your middle years? How is Jesus a model for you as you seek clarity for living “wisely and well”?

CLOSE the Session

Write Instruction for the Next Generation

Have participants turn in their Bibles to and read Proverbs 4:1-9. Invite them to write a brief note that contains what wisdom they want to offer those younger than themselves about living in faithful response to God. Invite volunteers to read their responses to the whole group.

Pray Together

As a closing prayer, sing or read aloud together the hymn “O God, Our Help in Ages Past” (Isaac Watts, 1719, in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 117, or <http://tiny.cc/38tuby>).

Teaching Alternatives

- Before the session, print out a list of quotations about midlife selected from a site such as <http://tiny.cc/x9tuby>. Invite participants to read and react to the quotations. Ask: Which of these quotations is your most/least favorite, and why?
- Watch a brief interview with Barbara Bradley Hagerty about *Life Reimagined* at <http://tiny.cc/dauuby>.
- Invite a mental health professional to visit your session and talk about how they work with people who are navigating the challenges of the middle years. Ask whether they regard the terms *midlife* and *midlife crisis* as helpful concepts, and why they do or don’t.

Next Week in
FaithLink
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The Power of Music

Music is an integral part of human experience with benefits in many aspects of our lives. What are these benefits? How does Christian tradition demonstrate that music can lead us to a deeper experience of God’s care for us?