

MIDWAY IN OUR LIFE'S JOURNEY

Middle age, middlescence, like adolescence is hard to define. Am I getting middle-aged when I'm 35? Or 45? Or 55? I don't know. Everyone must judge for himself, though usually everyone judges for someone else. I suppose a woman is getting middle-aged when she says to her husband "a size 12 doesn't seem nearly as large as it used to!" And a man knows he's getting middle-aged when people keep telling him how young he looks. Indeed, we're all getting there – or maybe middlescence is – where you start exchanging enthusiasms for symptoms (or thinking "in just two more weeks – I'm bound to feel better.

Maybe it's when you suddenly realize life has two tragedies: 1) not getting what you want and 2) getting it. Knowing you'll never get to the top or if you did – wondering if the view was worth the climb. When you see your success as a practical joke.

In the opening tercets of his *Comedy*, Dante describes the feeling of middle age thus:

Midway in our life's journey, I went astray
From the straight road and woke to find myself
Alone in a dark wood. How shall I say
What wood that was! I never saw so drear
So rank, so arduous a wilderness!
Its very memory gives a shape to fear.
Death could scarce be more bitter than that place!
But since it came to good, I will recount
All that I found revealed there by God's grace

(from John Ciardi's translation of *The Inferno*)

Dante was 35 – mathematically middle-age in being precisely half-way along the Biblical three score and ten – and as often happens at 35 – he came up with a start, stopped counting birthdays and started counting number of years until his death-day. The feeling that flooded, frightened him is often characteristic of those who suddenly realize they have reached "midway in our life's journey." – the trip being half over. At this stage the easy strength of youth, the attitude: "sure I can do it" – and the facile optimism of the young: ("don't worry, everything'll be all right") are over. While the tranquil acceptance, the serene reflectiveness, at least hoped for, in old age are still far off. So that one is left in the uncertainties of mid-passage. When one is young – everything seems possible, all doors are open to the light; the future? Why it beckons down a thousand roads: take this one, take that one, take anyone, change homes, change towns, change friends, change jobs, what is impossible? Therefore, choose, make mistakes, choose

WCB 610723, p1

again and what's the loss? – time is as abundant as air and as free – youth is the prodigal age and well it should be.

But ... the years pass, (oh how they pass) and suddenly we wake to find ourselves like Dante in a much darker wood – how shall I say it? – Hemmed in? Not exactly but limited, limited now by a long line of old choices – and no longer the energy, the opportunity to make a fresh start – caught now, fixed in our job, tied in with our family, firmly bolted down by our increasingly complicated relationships, our growing responsibilities – not as free now at mid-passage as we dreamed we would be when we someday made our money, our place (indeed, in ways much less free than we used to be when we dreamed those dreams of future freedom). We might call this “dark wood” feeling of middle-age at 35 “the panic of closing doors.” So many roads now you can not take: I saw a sign on a rickety old building: “Closed for good.” Might as well face it – for anyone midway in our life's journey” – a great many opportunities really are “closed for good.” How strange – when we're young – age looks like a plus sign – we so desperately want to be grown up. Wait'll I'm grown-up says the fifteen years old boy to his father and his father smiles knowingly.

I'll never forget when I came here at 23 – “boy what you doing out of your home room?”

But at the midway point aging looks more like a minus than a plus sign. We may have more external security now but less internal security.

And yet the Book says “this ought not to be” – aging should be a plus sign and not a minus – in spite of the fact that someone said, “aging improves wine, cheese and nothing else I can think of.”

Some one asked the indomitable Moms Mabley how you got the honor of being a Senior Citizen. She said, “don't you worry none, honey – you'll just wake up one morning – and you got it.” Well, it does slip up on you if you're very, very fortunate – you just wake up one morning and you got it. “The alternative,” said Lady Aster who didn't want to face it either, “is unthinkable.”

But some of us (like the cosmetic queen, Elizabeth Arden, resist aging to the death – yet even she said “There is, of course, one wonderful thing aging brings,” then she paused and added, “but I can't think what it is.” “Oh, yes,” – “blessed forgetfulness>” – “We forget the bad things and treasurer the good.” So may it be.

So let me give us aging some good advice. Even though Wilde advised, “It is always a silly thing to give advice, but good advice is absolutely fatal.” Or as a small schoolgirl described Socrates, “Socrates,” she wrote, “was a Greek philosopher who went about giving people good advice. They poisoned him.”

But let’s try – here goes. And the first principle is this: When you’ve reached midway “in our life journey” never look back in resentment, neither at opportunities missed – or glories faded. There is too much of this looking back in resentment – too much, and our middlescent tensions, frustrations and lostness on early family life. A fortyish year old man some years ago started out his explanation to me of his own foolhardiness by saying, “I am the way I am because my mother was a harridan.” Well the old lady may have been the broom stick variety but looking back in resentment wasn’t noticeably helping the son to improve on her any. He struck one as a bit of a warlock himself. Middle-age is not going to be made any healthier or happier by living in, shredding, constantly examining and re-examining all the innards of a hateful past. Neither will the present be enhanced by bemoaning old opportunities wasted – “if” – what a horror that little word can become in middlescence – “if” I’d only moved to Saskatchewan or Salisbury, or if I’d applied myself, if I hadn’t become a parson, or, I’d invested in Mobil, if I had, if I hadn’t -- if, if, if –

Or again, there are those who make middlescence an age of misery by looking back on glories faded. “Those were the days – the good old days” – and there wells up anger, resentment that they’re over and done with. Applause all gone – well, they are over and done with. That’s a fact. But they probably weren’t so good as we recall. Memory is tricky; you’ve got to watch it! Anyway, why let a good yesterday spoil a perfectly good day today? But we often do and it’s about as silly a way of spoiling a day as I know of.

So, don’t look back in anger in resentment -- just in honest recognition. Every garment has it’s “seamy side” -- the side where the seams, the stitching is to be found. So does every life – but you don’t have to be afraid of it, only see it as a part of the whole. When you see it in the light of God.

And that’s precisely what our Christian faith helps us to do, to see life whole under the light of God – seamy side and all. We may not be able to call back our past to “cancel half a ‘line’ -- or sin” or relive the glory either. But God in Jesus Christ is a “great forgiver” – so that

the Christian does not have to live in the terror of old guilts. You can see your ancient wrongs without shuttering – for God has given you a clean, fresh start and you’ve learned by these old wounds and surely the sheer act of living must have taught us something, we’ve grown in tender sympathy for the sins of other folk. So like St. Paul at mid-life, forgetting those things which are past, we press on toward the goal of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

And did not our Lord say, “No man having once put his hand to the plough and looking back is fit for the Kingdom of God”?

And as for the good in the old days – though you cannot relive it – it is never lost. Never lost, my dear friends. Every kind word you’ve ever spoken, every tenderness of yours that’s lifted another life, every loving touch and shared laughter, every gift of yourself – is a memory to sweeten and strengthen your life today and forever, as well as the living of many others.

So don’t waste your middlecent years looking back in resentment – God forbid!

And the second bit of advice is never look forward in fear. Sometimes I think a lot of this modern “look back in anger” song and dance and literary routine is nothing more than looking forward in fear.

In fear that at “midway of our life’s journey” we’ve already seen it all, already done it all, and there’s nothing left to look forward to. What’s left? To the sensate man at middle age, the future isn’t an open road any more. It’s an open pit! After experiencing every sensation there is, what comes next? Other than empty, psychotic horror? You can’t help but look forward in fear – if life is just the search for one new sensation after another. For by middle-life they’re just about over.

But, if life has a spiritual depth – meaning – significance – beyond the sensate – then there is no fear in looking forward – for there is no limit to exploring the spirit. Because every age has its own particular ways to serve God and one’s fellow man. As William Allen wrote on his seventieth birthday: “I am not afraid of tomorrow, for I have seen yesterday and I like today and I’m in God’s keeping.”

Like Dante, the fear of the future is often the fear of death, but for the Christian – even death holds out a kind hand.

Middle age is not an anxious time – if you do not look back in anger and if you do not look forward in fear.

Rather – and this is the third and final bit of advice. Look around in awareness and look up in faith. Be aware of the limitation but also of the possibilities of each period of life. Koheleth, the teacher of Ecclesiastes knew that: “to every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven.” (3:1)

Childhood has its possibilities – for play unhampered by the thought that work needs to be done. But childhood has its limitations too, so little of the joy of creative and constructive effort. Youth has its possibilities also – movement, open mind, quick changes of girl friends and job – but not the joy of a mature man’s stable family love and the deep pleasure of managing one’s business or profession and watching it grow under his leadership. And old age – all have their possibilities and their limits, too. You know them as well as I do.

Only be aware then that no one age has everything – and let us be satisfied with what there is to enjoy in each age in life as we come to it for we may or may not reach the stage ahead.

Therefore, live now – in terms of your present age and live now in faith. Believe that you are important to God now – as you are today – that you are needed – not as you were twenty years ago as you will be some years hence – but now you are important to God.

Cal Jung in *Modern Man in Search of A Soul* writes: “Among all my patients in the second half of life – that is to say, over thirty-five, there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a realistic outlook on life.” What is the purpose of life? “Is this all there is?” What can be done to make it through the dark wood safely?

Say, “Those were the days!” and we may look back wistfully, and say, “That will be the day!” and we may look forward hopefully, but God always says to us, “These are the days!” Indeed, this is the day, “This is the day which God hath made, we will rejoice and be glad in it.”

So may it be.

Amen.