

“Staying Focused on What Matters: A Vision of Teaching at Midlife”

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Sometimes our most telling insights dawn on us when we least expect them. My most recent experience of this sort occurred recently during a seminar I was teaching to fifteen very bright, particularly delightful Carleton students. This was their first term of college--they were incredibly eager and unusually engaged with one other. The subject--"Faith, Hope and Love: Religious Responses to Suffering"--was one I had never taught before, so I came to the course fresh and open to going wherever this material might lead us. And because I was also the academic advisor to these first-year students, we very quickly developed unusually strong relationships. About midway through the course I decided it was time for a social event outside of class, a chance to eat and play and just "hang out" together. We met in Sayles, I provided the subs for dinner, and we talked about school and families and life, much as I do with friends. Conversation flowed, my rapport with the students was great, I was "in my element." How wonderful, I thought, to be so connected to these kids. I was feeling like a young prof, really "cool." After dinner, we moved upstairs to play some games. That's when I made my fatal mistake. Confident that I could be one of the gang, I challenged one of the students to a game of ping-pong, something I was once fairly good at. With the first volley, though, I knew I was in trouble. The problem was that each time the ball sailed across the net toward my side of the table, it kept getting fuzzier: "ping"--in focus, "pong"--out of focus. "Damn," I thought, this is what my ophthalmologist meant when he warned me that as we age our eyes don't refocus as quickly as they used to, that it might be time to consider bifocals. And then I had a second, sinking realization, almost worse than the first--how was I going to explain to this 18 year old punk across the table that I was too old to focus clearly on the ball. No, forget that--I'm still too proud to admit my weakness so openly. But inside I know the truth--that I'm really not as young as I used to be. No, worse yet, I'm not as young as I imagine I am, as I wish I were, as felt I was just moments ago.

I recount this story because it is emblematic for me of several aspects of middle-age, as I experience it. It is customary, of course, to talk about midlife as a time of losses, and not without good reason. First, of course, there are the physical changes, the myriad of little (and not so little) ways in which I am not as strong or as quick or as agile as I once was. The little aches and pains I regularly experience remind me that my body has slowed down. I forget things that I used to be able to remember, I sometimes lose

my train of thought in the middle of a lecture, or struggle to find the words I'm looking for. Though I still think of myself as fairly active and energetic, I know that ten years ago I was more so, and ten years hence I will be still less so. On the physical level, middle-age is undeniably about loss and gradual decline.

But the psychological adjustments are no less dramatic than the physical ones. The legendary "midlife crisis," though we exaggerate its importance in our culture, does represent a genuine shift in consciousness. By this point, we have come far enough to know that, in all likelihood, we will not achieve all that we once hoped for; some of our dreams really never will come true. And we have learned, sometimes the hard way, that life is not as full of promise and opportunity as we once believed or wished it to be. For all of us, I suspect, there is something--fame or fortune or happiness or success--that has eluded us. In any event, we are almost certainly not living the lives that we imagined for ourselves back when we graduated from college.

And that leads to perhaps the most basic of all experiences of midlife--the one I confronted across that ping-pong table from my student--we are not as young as many of us believe (or should I say "pretend") that we are. In a culture that glorifies youth and bombards us daily with images of adolescent sexuality, we cling (sometimes desperately) to the illusion of our own youthfulness. But in our heart of hearts, most of us know that those days are behind us, indeed, that most of our days are behind us. Much as we might wish it were otherwise, we are closer to the end of this journey than to its beginning. And that realization brings with it a host of questions--about what our life has amounted to, about our priorities for the time that remains, about the legacy we will leave behind us.

Middle-age, I think, is inevitably a sober time of life, a time to take stock as we look backward and forward in our own lives, as we find ourselves poised between our aging parents and our maturing children. In reflecting on this stage of life, I am reminded of a bit of ancient Jewish teaching about King Solomon. There are actually three books in the Hebrew Bible attributed to Solomon and, though modern scholars conclude that in fact he wrote none of them, the ancient rabbis regarded them as representing three distinct stages in his life. Song of Songs is a book of sensuous love poetry, filled with the imagery of spring, the exuberance of young love and sexual longing. It is the product of Solomon's youth. Ecclesiastes is marked by resignation and cynicism, full of admonitions that everything we do ultimately comes to naught, it is "emptiness and a striving after wind." This is the voice of Solomon in his old age. In

between, we find the curious book of Proverbs. It is less a book, really, than an anthology of aphorisms and reflections on how to make the most of life. It is the work of a man who has lived long enough to have learned a good bit about how the world works, but not so long that he has grown weary of life. Proverbs captures the perspective of Solomon at midlife, a book of wisdom and insight, expressing the sort of discernment that grows from sober reflection on decades of life experience.

So, I ask what to me is the central question of midlife: amid the losses and adjustments that mark these years, how do we find our wisdom? At this juncture, what have we learned about ourselves, about life, that can guide us in the years that remain and, perhaps more importantly, that we can bequeath to those who follow us? Each of us will respond to these questions differently, for our lives have followed different trajectories. I can respond only for myself, out of my own experience as father and son and husband and teacher.

From this vantage point it is clear to me that my life has been shaped most decisively by several experiences of loss and tragedy. My oldest brother died quite suddenly 17 years ago, when he was 39 and I was only 28. His death shattered my sense of family, and in the months that followed I found myself aware that I was holding my breath, wondering when tragedy would strike next. Never had I questioned that we would grow old together, and now I realized that any of my most cherished dreams for the future could evaporate in the blink of an eye. Several years and two children later, my first marriage ended, once again shattering my sense of family and my dreams for the future. It propelled me to open an entirely new chapter in my life, one that, I am pleased to report, has brought me much fulfillment and happiness. But, at the time, this was the defining crisis of my life. As a single dad in my 30's, I was forced to forge a new identity, to reassess my relationships with others, and, especially, to create a new kind of family with my two small children. Then, five years ago, my mother succumbed to cancer and with one parent gone it was clear that an era in my life had come to a close. Reflecting on her life and all the love she gave me, I knew that it was now up to me to carry on her values and transmit them to my children. And, last but not least, my sister has been living for the past five years with a form of leukemia for which, as yet, there is no cure. Being as close to her as I am, I know first-hand something of what it means to live every day with a life-threatening illness.

How shall I describe the cumulative effect of all these losses? In part, they have taught me to expect the unexpected, though not in an anxious or bitter way. I simply

know that life is not predictable and no longer assume that things will work out as I have planned. More importantly, it is now clear to me how much of life is not in my control; indeed, the things I care about most--like the health and life of those I love--are least in my control. As a result, I no longer take them for granted. In the process, I have discovered a new appreciation for the traditional Jewish practice of reciting blessings on all sorts of routine occasions--on opening one's eyes in the morning and on closing them at night, when one sees a storm, or meets a friend one hasn't seen in a long time, even when one wears a new article of clothing. Of course, I have long known about this ritual practice, and even taught students in my Introduction to Judaism class about it, but only recently have I understood its wisdom. It is a wonder each morning that I can breathe in and out, that I can open my eyes and see the world. By reciting a prayer at such moments I cultivate the habit of being thankful for all these everyday miracles. In short, each experience of loss has brought in its wake a deeper awareness of what I have not lost, and with it a deeper sense of gratitude.

Midlife, for me, has also been about growing comfortable with ambiguity. When I was 20 I was clear about what was right and true, and so too certain of which moral and political views I could dismiss out of hand. Today I feel certain only that most things are uncertain, that the truth lies almost invariably in that vast gray zone between the extremes. When I was younger I admired those who had the courage to take a radical position and defend it. Now I have come to see that it takes still greater courage to live with uncertainty. Those who see things in "black and white" terms, I now think, probably haven't looked at them very closely. But precisely because truth rarely appears to us so pure and unadulterated we frequently pretend to see clearly what is, in fact, rather fuzzy and indistinct. Today I readily sacrifice ideological purity for a more pragmatic approach to the world that can adapt to life's ever-changing challenges. Seeing clearly requires a willingness to explore the subtleties and nuances of situations, and to entertain multiple perspectives at once. Midlife is, above all else, a time of transition. The path of wisdom is not to resist all this flux and uncertainty, but to embrace it. On my most optimistic days, I believe it is even possible to live creatively in the midst of all the ambiguities that midlife brings.

Perhaps the overarching themes in all these reflections on midlife are balance and integration. With several decades of life experience behind me, this is the time to distill the lessons I've learned, to pay attention to the patterns that I see unfolding in my life, and to seek some sense of wholeness. By this point, I have had time to find myself

and lose myself and find myself again, to learn from my mistakes, and all with enough of life still ahead (I hope) that perhaps I can yet put these lessons into practice. No wonder that Solomon is supposed to have written proverbs at this point in life. Just now the impulse to consolidate what we have learned, to put the pieces of the puzzle together and to record them for ourselves and others is strongest. I am most aware of this impulse in relation to my children, as I try (like every parent, I suppose) to steer them away from the mistakes I have made. Perhaps this too explains my impatience with those who fail to learn from their mistakes, or who are disingenuous enough to suppose they haven't made any, or who just pretend they are something they are not. I have come in these years to value integrity above all other virtues, because it now seems clear to me that without it none of the others endures.

In a sense, much of what I have been trying to say here was expressed far more eloquently and succinctly by the eminent Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in his now famous serenity prayer, which can only have been the expression of a man at midlife: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." What I think we hope for at this stage in life is precisely this--to make our peace with all the things in the past that we cannot change, to bring our accumulated experience to bear on the problems that surround us in the present and that loom ahead, and to have enough discernment to sort through all life's ambiguities. Solomon, when he was our age, would surely have concurred.

Of course, all these reflections shape my experience as a teacher and express themselves in my relationships with students. It is a standard joke among faculty that, as we say, "the students keep getting younger and younger." There really is something peculiar about working year after year with 18-22 year olds; certainly, it has given me plenty of opportunities to reflect on what it means to be middle-aged. On the one hand, of course, it is positively maddening--they have so much energy, they have expended so little of their capital, they have the freedom to choose among so many paths. It is enough to make one appreciate George Bernard Shaw's quip--youth really is wasted on the young. I confess that I frequently look at my students with a combination of envy and nostalgia. They travel to distant parts of the world I will never see, embark on adventures of all sorts that I am now too old to have. On the other hand, they are so very young and unformed, naive in so many ways, largely untested by life's adversities, so uncertain about who they are. They come to Carleton with little idea of why they're here

and where they're headed. They are still years away from acquiring the sense of balance or integration or discernment that I have talked about. At those moments, I look at them with a combination of amusement and compassion. And I wouldn't for a moment consider changing places with them.

But there are times when I move beyond both envy of and sympathy for my students to what I think is a deeper appreciation of what it means to be a middle-aged teacher of young people. It gives me, almost daily, opportunities to share with them something of my experience, to give them some perspective on the challenges they face and perhaps to ease their way in the world just a bit. The student who is dealing with his parents' divorce, the one who is terrified that she is failing and has convinced herself that her admission to Carleton was a cruel mistake, another who is in a near-fatal car accident during winter break, and another who is in tears because the only serious relationship she's ever had just ended—all are looking for support and guidance, a bit of empathy or some words of advice from someone "older and wiser." I find that my role with these students is almost as much parental as professorial; indeed, the difference between these roles has faded over the years, for my oldest son and my youngest students are now virtually the same age. Many students are open to being mentored in this way, even eager for it, and I treasure the chance to engage them on this level. What an extraordinary privilege it is to encounter students in this way, helping these exceptionally gifted young people make their transition to independence and maturity. When I make those connections, I feel as though I have made the best possible use of my middle-age. They are genuinely grateful that I am willing to bring my life experience to bear on theirs, and I feel certain that these are the lessons they will remember long after my brilliant lectures have been forgotten, along with the grades they received and pretty much everything that appeared on the syllabi of my courses.

But this sort of engagement has something in it for me, too. I derive a vicarious satisfaction through my connection with their youthfulness. Their energy and creativity feed my own, their idealism (even when it is naive) restores my faith in humanity, their willingness to challenge every received truth forces me to reassess and defend my own values. I never feel more vibrant or alive than when I am engaged in animated conversation with these students, now less than half my age. Through them, I find that I keep in touch with that youthful part of myself that recedes farther and farther out of reach. So, in truth, I need their youthful exuberance at least as much as they need my middle-aged wisdom. I sometimes think that if we have to be middle-aged (and who

among us has a choice?), there is surely no better way to spend it than in dialogue with the young.

All of which brings me back to that fateful game of ping-pong. One of the defining characteristics of middle-age is that we are neither here nor there. Just as our children begin to need us less, our parents need us more. We live betwixt and between, for unlike the young, we are not defined by what lies ahead of us, and unlike the elderly, we are not defined by what lies behind us. We are defined, instead, by the particular dual vision that marks this time of life—our ability to look back at the distance we have travelled and ahead at the challenges we still face—and by the ability to embrace the very ambiguities of this transitional time. This is a time for grieving our losses, consolidating our gains, and distilling our experience for whatever lies ahead. It is a time when we have learned what matters and how to keep it in focus, a time for cultivating our wisdom. And the path of wisdom lies, I now think, in being able to keep in touch with the youthfulness both within and around us, and integrating it with the life experience we have gained in all the intervening years. It is the hope of achieving that integration that keeps me here, interacting with young people, sharing with them and being inspired by them. At times, it even misleads me into thinking that I can be one of them again, if only for an evening. The fact that I cannot, however, will not prevent me from teaching them or playing with them. But there are some lessons I have learned along the way--next time I will probably stick to playing pool.