



Navigating Transitions in the Middle Years George Swingler

This booklet offers tips on finding your way through midlife towards renewal, meaning and a deeper connection with yourself.

We usually pass through two overlapping phases, in early and later midlife. For convenience, this booklet is in two parts, although it is probably worth reading both:

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Dear Reader

I hope you find this booklet useful. Please feel free to pass it on to anyone else you think might benefit.

Please remember that we are all different, and none of the suggestions will apply to everyone. Use what's helpful and disregard the rest.

I'll be delighted to receive your comments for improvement [>>Email . .](#)

There is a special 'alchemy' in having someone listening empathically and without judgement to what you are thinking [>>more..](#) Drop me a line if you'd like to supplement this booklet with in-person coaching [>>Email . .](#)

To download any other of the free 'navigation' resources (for yourself, or friends or family) [>>click here:](#)

Navigation for Young Adults

Navigation in the Sixties

Navigation by Journaling

Regular blog posts and/or news items are [>>just a click away.](#)

And you can check out [>>My Website](#)

Bon voyage!

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Navigating Transitions in the Middle Years

Is this you?

You've spent your life planning for this future and it hasn't really worked out as you'd dreamed. You're not sure that you really want to be where you are.

You have so many responsibilities and expectations to meet. It's exhausting, and you wonder who you are beneath the *roles* you play. That's hard to admit, even to yourself. Your youth seems to be ebbing away, you feel adrift and you're not sure that your friends are much better off.

Alternatively, things could have gone well, but the fire has gone out. You're in a comfort zone, you're bored, and it just feels empty. Sadly, with all your commitments it's easier not to rock the boat, and just drift with the stream...

If you've also been caring for your family, you may feel a loss of purpose or direction in an 'empty nest, or now see a chance to take up these opportunities that you'd put on hold...

An opportunity?

These feelings signal an easily missed but crucial opportunity for renewal.

The Middle Years entail a fundamental shift in emphasis from 'making it' to meaning.

Notice its arrival, and don't ignore it!

The Challenge

Those who travel the passage consciously render their lives more meaningful. Those who do not, remain prisoners of childhood, however successful they may appear.

James Hollis

Part 1 - Is this really my life?



If that's how you feel, you are not alone. And it's not all bad.

Frederic Hudson describes the journey like this:

"Typically, but not necessarily, you feel a hollow loneliness that doesn't go away, and you fear that you've been abandoned not only by your past but by your future as well..."

"The ghosts from your past confront you, and the ghosts of your future taunt you, but eventually they have less and less impact as you grow stronger and find new life within."

"In time, you feel not merely healed but vital and alive. It is a quiet fire, within, and it brings warmth and new confidence. Your eyes mirror the resilience that you have found. You want little but feel much, and most of all you feel in touch with the deep murmurs of your own heart. Your deep-seated values arise to shape your new human agenda, and you get ready to journey again."

Notice when it arrives

The thoughts and feelings can sneak in under the radar. They're easy to overlook, ignore or deny.

Don't! What has worked for you so far will not work so well from here on. You'll need to find new ways of doing, and being.

Recognise the cycle

You are not sick. This is a normal stage of life, a time for renewal, for clarifying your life's issues and direction. It's part of the ongoing renewal that we all go through (if we get it right).

Adults actually learn this way, by a process involving *transformation* more than *information*. [->>Blog](#)

Choose the voices to follow

We all have messages that drive our agendas. Your current ones may have brought you this far, but won't get you anywhere worthwhile from here. Take time to identify these old messages.

Reflect regularly on where you are *as a person*. Listen for new voices, including unexpected whispers from the wings, and from deep inside.

Read

It is what you read when you don't have to that determines what you will be when you can't help it.

Oscar Wilde

You are in the company of many who have come through this experience, and it's often helpful to learn from their collective wisdom. Here are three books on midlife that have helped different people with different perspectives:

>>[The Middle Passage](#) by James Hollis, a Jungian Analyst

>>[Falling Upward](#) by Richard Rohr, a very inclusive Franciscan priest

>>[Half Time](#) by Bob Burford, from an explicitly Christian perspective.

Talk with friends

You may feel that you're the only person going through this, but you are definitely not alone. Your friends may well not have broached the subject because they too think that they are the only ones. Open a conversation with a friend who is willing to talk, and to listen. Talking aloud will help both of you gain helpful perspectives.

Take long walks.

Talk with yourself

Up until this stage your identity has developed largely through a sort of negotiation between your ego and *society*. Now's the time to step back and consciously nurture an inner conversation with *yourself*, so that your ego can negotiate a new identity with your *true self*.

Consider keeping a journal. It can provide a framework for a conversation with yourself, even a kind of coaching conversation with yourself. For a free download of tips on how to keep a journal [>>click here](#).

Look after yourself

If you are not already exercising, now is the time to start. **Aerobic exercise** (walking, jogging, swimming, cycling) not only improves your physical health, it helps reduce anxiety and depression.

Try some form of **meditation**. If you are not sure of which type of meditation, mindfulness is widely applicable. [>>An eight-week course](#) has been shown to reduce

anxiety, depression, irritability and stress, and to improve relationships and immunity. The guided meditations used in this course are [available free online](#). So are [a similar set from another academic institution](#), and [a fuller collection](#).

Take Time Out

"Yeah, sure!" you say.

A three-month sabbatical is presumably (or not necessarily?) out of the question, but a little time each week or a half day a month may be the start.

Loss can liberate

Paradoxically, emotional and spiritual growth don't happen when all is going well. Loss can be like pruning; painful preparation for future fruitfulness. Let yourself feel the feelings of loss as they arrive. Resisting will just prolong the natural healing process.

When we cling, often forever, to our old patterns of thinking and behaving, we fail to negotiate any crisis, to truly grow up, and to experience the joyful sense of rebirth that accompanies the successful transition into greater maturity.

M. Scott Peck

Use the chance to find meaning

There is no easy answer to suffering, and trite answers merely make it worse. Many people however find meaning through the suffering. They would never have chosen to go this route but, after they've been through it, they've been pleased they were forced to. It seems to be part of the same ongoing cycle of renewal [Blog](#).

*In some ways suffering ceases to be suffering
at the moment it finds a meaning . . .*

Viktor Frankl

Maybe read Part 2..

Parts 1 and 2 overlap, and some of the suggestions in Part 2 might also be helpful.

*The invitation of the Middle Passage is to become
conscious, accept responsibility for the rest of the pages
and risk the largeness of life to which we are summoned.*

James Hollis

Part 2 – Where's the Passion Gone?



*No good times, no bad times,
There's no times at all,
Just The New York Times,
...
Time
Is tapping on my forehead,
Hanging from my mirror,
Rattling the teacups,*

*And I wonder,
How long can I delay?*

Paul Simon

Sometime in your Fifties you may find that what you're doing has lost its appeal. You've been there, done that, and the T-shirt is old and faded.

Things may have gone well, but the fire has died. You're in a comfort zone, you're bored, and it may be hard to admit even to yourself.

You have a sense of restlessness, a yearning for something more, for uncharted terrain and new challenges. You know you're capable of creating something new, but

you're deeply embedded in so many relationships, commitments and work engagements that it's easier not to rock the boat and to just drift with the stream. You may feel it's selfish to rock the boat, but in the long run others will probably benefit more from a revitalised and fuller you.

Play

Play is not just for children. We humans have an advantage over other creatures in that we retain many more of our childlike qualities (including playfulness) into adulthood. That's partly why we're so adaptable.

Play is the highest form of research.

Albert Einstein

Play simultaneously creates a sense of both safety and adventure, and encourages us to adapt authentically to the outside world. Play is vital for problem solving, creativity, relationships and healing. It catalyses couples' relationships and intimacy, and can even facilitate deep connection with strangers. [>> Watch a TED talk by an expert on play.](#)

The supreme accomplishment is to blur the line between work and play.

So how does one play?

- It's important that play is *part of your whole life*, not just your spare time. Small frequent doses go a long way.
- *Find the right people*. Spend time with fun friends - it's infectious. Play with kids (the experts) and your loved ones.

- You can also *talk to your dog* (especially on matters of grave political import) or *read aloud to your partner*. (Potential authors include Art Buchwald, PG Wodehouse, Bill Bryson, Herman Charles Bosman and whomever you find fun).
- Think back as far as you can to the clearest, most joyful and playful memories that you have. Build on the emotions of those memories, and ponder how they can feed into your life now.

Try some new things

When was the last time you did something for the first time?

Experiment. Try a new adventure, a new language, an art form, a travel experience.

Just go to the movies without first checking what's on. Or go out to eat and ask the waitron to bring you whatever (s)he recommends (with guaranteed indemnity, and appropriate price limits).

Read a novel in an unfamiliar genre. Perhaps a detective novel instead of a romance, or *vice versa*?

What might creativity release in you?

Experiment with small acts of creativity at home (maybe a new recipe book, or set the table in a new way).

Listen to music. It reduces anxiety and depression, and improves mental functioning

Take showers as "creative pauses" [>>More..](#) A bath worked rather well for Archimedes, and a shower has a further advantage of providing "white noise".

Doodle. It improves learning, creativity and performance [>>More..](#)

Learn some new things

Learning is how we adapt to changing circumstances, and can help rekindle your fire *and* keep your brain in working order as you age. The trick is to keep learning *new* things, not just consolidating existing specialised expertise.

Learn about another industry, or another religion.

Consider a course in a field that is all new to you.

Two of many accessible options are;

- a) >>free online courses from an array of top universities worldwide;
- b) >>courses of audio or video lectures by selected teachers (at a price).

These >>prices are much lower via a subscription option from an Amazon subsidiary, and a few lectures are available >>free from the publisher.

Or include some new motor skills, like learning a musical instrument, or video games, or whatever takes their fancy.

A crucial aspect of learning new things is **unlearning** what now gets in the way. Recognising what needs to be unlearned is a challenge in itself. Keep an open mind and repeatedly challenge your long-held assumptions and perceptions.

Clear the clutter

You've most likely had a long period of accumulating relationships, possessions, activities and habits. Now is a good time to lighten the load. It will help decide what really matters.

Spend time alone

Ideally go away for as long as feasible, on your own. Write, walk, sleep, and read. Notice what starts to surface for you, what you recall about past passions, and what gives you energy for the future.

Test a few dreams

Think back to dreams that you had when you were young but that somehow got lost on the way.

And maybe discover some new ones..

They're waiting!

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