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*Second Half for the Man in the Mirror*  
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# INTRODUCTION

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ONE DAY AT THE AGE OF forty-eight, I was standing in our kitchen, ironing a dress shirt. As I worked the iron back and forth across the cotton, my thoughts began to drift. I saw myself standing in that exact same spot doing the exact same thing ten years later at the age of fifty-eight.

Frankly, I was startled. I wondered, *What will have changed ten years from now?* The answer seemed to be “nothing,” unless I began to put some things in motion now. That’s what this book is all about—putting some things in motion so that you will be pleased with who you become over the next ten years.

My fascination with the midlife experience began in 1974. As a young, aspiring twenty-five-year-old real estate broker, I sold a building for a man mired down in problems at the midpoint of his life.

Donald (as with all names in this book, this one has been changed) had been the shooting star, the proverbial golden boy, of the Orlando real estate market. His company got caught in an upward spiral of ever-increasing development successes. When a severe recession hit in the early 1970s, the overhead “nut” and debt payments brought his whole leveraged empire tumbling down on him.

Actually, I met Donald after all the employees had left, after he had left his wife, and the dust was starting to settle. He was darkly depressed, living alone in his office. And it was a real pigsty. Trash, dirty clothes, file folders, microwave dinner tins, and Chinese take-out boxes were strewn and piled everywhere. In addition, he had moved all his remaining earthly possessions into this one room in the building he wanted to sell—one of his few remaining assets. He wanted to sell, it turned out, so that he could run away on his sailboat. I was there because I had a buyer for the building.

I must tell you, however, that there was something about this man that struck a deep chord within me. Even though Donald was despondent, mopey, and hard to talk to, he still possessed a shadow of that charisma that had led to such meteoric success. I couldn't help but like him.

As I scanned his hovel of an office I could scarcely take it in. It shocked my sensibilities; it was chaos. Yet there amid the filth and scattered business papers, my eyes fell on the only semblance of order, symmetry, and beauty in the entire place. Standing elegantly on a credenza was a single, framed photograph of a small girl standing on the back of a sailboat.

As I studied the picture for a moment I noticed that Donald had made this photograph (consciously or not, I do not know) the focal point of his entire office and, because this office at that point was his entire life, the focal point of his existence.

"Who is that?" I asked.

At that, as if someone had opened a vacuum-packed can, fresh air rushed into the room. The heavy mood of the moment was immediately replaced by a light airiness, and he said with great pride and affection, "That's my daughter, Jennifer." Also, etched across the stern of the boat was the name *Jennifer*.

I was overwhelmed at how quickly the simple thought of his daughter had lifted the thick, gloomy clouds suspended in the air all about him. It was clear that Jennifer was the anchor of his soul, the slender thread tied to his spirit that kept him from drifting off into complete despair. The mere mention of her name gave him a second wind.

I was so deeply moved by the intensity of his love for her and the power that the mere mention of her name had to restore a sense of hope to his soul, that I vowed to myself if Patsy and I ever had a daughter her name would be Jennifer.

We did have a daughter. And her name is Jennifer.

By God's grace, very few of us will ever sink as deeply as Donald did into an all-out, old-fashioned midlife crisis. In fact, one of my purposes for writing this book is to show you how to avoid such a crisis. Yet virtually all of us will at some point be disappointed when life returns less than we expected.

If you are reading this book you are probably going through a midlife experience right now. Maybe you're just coming out of one, or suspect you're headed into one. Or perhaps your spouse is struggling.

The question is, when you do go through your midlife slump—whether a minor “funk” or a great ordeal—what will be the anchor for your soul? What will give you a semblance of order, symmetry, and beauty? What or who will be the focal point of your life? How will you replace the heavy moods? What will give you pride and love? What are the threads or ropes that will keep you from drifting away? How will you restore a sense of hope in your soul? Where will your “second wind” come from? These are the questions I hope to help you answer in this book as you reinvent yourself for the second half of the journey.

Some books seek to help those in crisis. By contrast, this book is written for the majority of us who, though not desperate enough for professional help, could use a hand to sort out midlife's sometimes bewildering sense of sadness and loss. I suggest using it for small group study. You may be surprised at how many others are facing the same issues you are.

The purpose of this book is to raise the issues common to all of us at midlife, to offer practical ideas to make peace with the changes that occur, and to show you how to reinvent yourself to experience a deeper, lasting sense of significance and joy during the second half of the journey.

I hope you will not simply read this book, but experience it. Let it be a time to take stock, a time to find humor, a time to adjust to the impossible changes taking place, a time to accept disappointment, a time to adjust your expectations and, most of all, a time to rediscover the joy of your humanity and your God.

My prayer and belief for you is that your second half will read like Job's: “The Lord blessed Job in the second half of his life even more than in the beginning” (Job 42:12 *New Living Translation*).

By the way, Donald eventually did come out of his difficult season and is doing well.

# PART ONE

## Midpoint

## O N E

# The New Meaning of Midlife—Not a Monolithic Experience

*You cannot discover new lands unless you  
leave shore for a very long time.*

ANDRE GIDE

THE BEAUTIFUL, MYSTERIOUS ST. JOHNS RIVER meanders through central Florida not far from where we live. Near the headwaters the river runs swift, but the waters slow as the river deepens and the journey lengthens.

Halfway to its final destination, the river opens into a huge lake. Without its two banks, the river has no direction. The waters spread out and barely move. Each droplet of water entering the mouth of this lake travels a different course. But this is not the Dead Sea, so eventually two riverbanks gather the waters, and the river once again runs steady.

Midlife is like a lake. Early in our lives we run swift like a river, but shallow. As we put years behind us, though, we deepen. Then one day, we enter the opened jaws of midlife. Where once we felt direction and velocity, suddenly we find ourselves swirling about, sometimes aimlessly, or so it seems. Each of us, like individual droplets of water, will take a different path through this part of the journey. For some of us it will only be a slowdown. Others will feel forgotten and abandoned by the father of the river. Some, unable to see where the waters converge and once again grow strong, will despair.

Time, however, stops for no one and nothing. Eventually all the little droplets of water, however depressed they may be, find themselves regaining speed as the riverbanks once again gather the waters, point them forward, and give them purpose.

## RESTRUCTURING AND CELEBRATION

Midlife is not a monolithic experience. Each of us will experience midlife in our own way. We cannot project at what age it will begin, how long it will last, or the intensity with which it will hit us. Each of us will drift through a different part of the lake. For some it will be a mere “slump”; for others a “funk”; for still others an all-out crisis. And, while midlife has no single cause, its issues are predictable. All must pass through this lake.

In the early 1990s the real estate industry was stunned when Olympia and York, the world’s largest developer, declared bankruptcy. One analyst summed it up when he said, “Nobody is bigger than the market.”

As there is a “restructuring” cycle in business, so there is a restructuring cycle in our private lives. This “reorganization” takes place sometime during our thirties, forties, or fifties and can span several years, even a decade. We call it midlife, though many of us would deny its existence and postpone its decisions. But nobody is bigger than the midlife experience. Nobody.

We each come to a moment when we must admit, even if only to ourselves, that things are changing. Some of us will embrace the changes, others will deny them as long as possible.

Though no one escapes the midlife experience, neither is it the end of the world. In fact, as we will see, midlife can become a rich, promising season of reinventing ourselves for the rest of the journey.

Before we can reinvent ourselves, though, we must first humbly admit we have reached the middle years. My wife, Patsy, and I became middle-aged on the same day. Here’s how it happened.

One evening I was washing my face to get ready for bed, and I started laughing. Patsy, who was reading in bed, called out, “What’s so funny?”

At that, I walked from the bathroom to the bedroom so she could see. As I had lathered up my face, I had forgotten to take off my glasses, and the lenses were coated with a thin film of soap punctuated with bubbles.

Patsy chuckled and said (this is a true story), “That’s nothing! This morning I was trying to balance our checkbook, but I couldn’t get the calculator to work. Finally, I looked down and realized I had been punching numbers into the portable telephone.”

After we regained some composure we had to admit that, like the sixty thousand slaves who passed through Senegal's infamous "door of no return," we had passed through a "time portal" through which we could never return.

In this book I would like us to learn how to celebrate midlife. It can and should be an encouraging, growing time. It's a time to clean out closets. It's a time to unpack baggage we accumulated along the journey. It's a time to toss some things into the emotional dumpster.

Whether you have a mild case of "midlife slump" or find yourself in an all-out crisis, you're normal. And while we do need to deal with the issues raised by thirty-five, forty, fifty, or more years of neglect and imbalance, the real task of midlife—and our task together in this book—is to reinvent ourselves for the rest of the journey.

## **CHANGES IN THE LIFE CYCLE**

The fundamental nature of the midlife experience is changing. According to researcher and writer Gail Sheehy, a revolution is taking place in the life cycle. She points out that when our parents turned fifty they thought of themselves as old. Not us, though. "Middle age has already been pushed far into the fifties—if it is acknowledged at all today. The territory of the fifties, sixties, and beyond is changing so radically that it now opens up whole new passages leading to stages of life that are nothing like what our parents or grandparents experienced. Fifty is now what forty used to be."<sup>1</sup>

The midlife experience can begin as early as the thirties or may stretch well into the fifties. Yet, the idea I would like to get across is that midlife is not so much an age as an experience.

Today we enjoy two phases of the life cycle our forefathers at the turn of the century did not experience: adolescence and midlife. Instead, our forebears began working from the earliest ages (typically on a farm) and died before they were old enough to wonder, "How will I spend the rest of my life?"

## **CHANGES IN LIFE EXPECTANCY: THE NEXT THIRTY YEARS**

One morning, when I was forty-seven, I asked the 175 men at the Bible study I teach each Friday morning to stand. Next I asked all the

men over fifty-seven to sit down, then said, “Today in Russia the life expectancy of a man is fifty-seven. For those of you sitting down right now, if you lived in Russia today—you’re dead!”

Finally, I said, “In the United States during the year 1900 the average male life expectancy was forty-seven. If you’re over forty-seven, you’re dead. Sit down.” By then roughly forty percent of the men had taken their seats. As I stood before them I pondered that if I, at the age of forty-seven, had lived in 1900, this would be the year I was expected to die.

It is by the grace of God through science, medical research, and technology that a litany of life-extending breakthroughs have lengthened life expectancy into the midseventies. Remarkable advances with sanitation, pesticides, fluoride, chlorine, medicine, diet, and hygiene have virtually doubled the quantity and quality of our productive adult lives.

Since 1900 the average life span has increased by nearly thirty years.<sup>2</sup> So the whole concept of “midlife” is a relatively new idea. And it is a blessing. Through increased prosperity and medical advances these additional thirty years (or more) will be the most productive, authentic years of your life. They will be decades of substance and stability.

At the turn of century what we now call midlife was the end of life. In 1950 it was the door to old age. The stereotype we must overcome is that the next step after reaching midlife is “getting old.” The new “attitude” is that midlife symbolizes the gateway to a second adulthood—the second phase of *productive* adulthood.

When one of my best friends of twenty-five years turned fifty, we attended his surprise birthday party. He said he woke up a little down that morning, so he took the morning off to get a haircut and have some shoes repaired. Then his friends completely surprised him with a special luncheon. He was truly touched. Later he lamented that five-sevenths of his life was now over.

Actually, I think a better way to think of turning fifty is to say that the first half of your productive adult life is over. In other words, the first half of productive adult life is roughly twenty-five to fifty and the second half is from fifty to seventy-five. When thought of this way, it puts an entirely different spin on fifty.

Midlife promises not to be a door to a dungeon but a window that opens onto a whole new life of renewal and celebration. Don’t think of

your “life” expectancy in the single category of “time.” In addition, you have a “productive” expectancy, a “health” expectancy, a “family life” expectancy, and a “financial” expectancy. Can you think of other expectancies?

The real issue is not that we reach “the middle,” but how do we spend (or invest) the extra thirty years that medicine and technology, by God’s grace, have bequeathed us?

We must, however, deal with two problems to get there. We need a new picture of the future, and we must go through a transition.

## A NEW PICTURE OF THE FUTURE

First, we need a new understanding of the future. We are the first generation that has peered down the corridor of time and been able to envision a healthy, vibrant seventy-five-year-old picture. A healthy fifty-year-old woman today can expect to live until she is eighty-one; a healthy fifty-year-old man until he is seventy-six.<sup>3</sup>

NBA Hall of Fame coach Chuck Daly became the head coach of the Orlando Magic at sixty-seven. Quality expert Phil Crosby bought back his company at seventy. John Glenn boarded the space shuttle at seventy-seven. Billy Graham held crusades at eighty. The average age of a Supreme Court Justice at the turn of the century is sixty-six, (four of them are over sixty-five, and Justice Blackmun retired at eighty-five). Two of my closest friends and leaders in our organization are still active in the business world, one at seventy-two and the other at seventy-eight. Speaker and motivator Paul Meyer climbed the tallest mountain in America at seventy.

While these examples from our parents’ generation somewhat defy the norm, they represent “early models” of what will define the norm for our generation. In other words, when you turn seventy the Chuck Daly/Phil Crosby experiences will be normative, not exceptional. Baby boomers will redefine what it means to be sixty-five, seventy, and seventy-five. In fact, they (we) will demand useful, productive lives.

This means we must develop a whole new pattern for thinking about these thirty years. They are no longer “golden” in the sense of laid back, retiring times. Instead, they look “platinum.” They hold promise for

vitality, contribution, and love. For most of us these thirty years will be larger, more creative, more freedom filled, and more exciting. Everyone knows aged wine is better than new.

Personally, I doubt that many of us from our generation will retire to little condominium pods where we stand waist deep in the swimming pool, wear straw hats by day, and play bingo in the recreation hall by night. Instead, we will reinvent new avenues of enterprise and loving service to humankind. Where do you visualize yourself at seventy-five?

### **CHANGES IN THE MEANING OF MIDLIFE: THE NEXT ONE TO TEN YEARS**

Second, somewhere near the middle of our adult productive lives all of us will go through a transition. William Bridges called it “the neutral zone.”<sup>4</sup> Bob Buford has coined the hopeful term “halftime.”<sup>5</sup> Gail Sheehy calls it a “passage.” I have used the analogy of a river slowing as it opens into a lake, before once again regaining speed between two defining banks.

William Bridges describes a transition like midlife as an ending of a phase, followed by a neutral zone, and then a new beginning. To enter the highly productive, healthy years ahead we must first pass through this “neutral zone”—the “lake”—between the first and second phases of our productive adult lives.

Some of us will find ourselves pouring into this lake early or late, but most of us will flow into midlife between thirty-five and fifty-five. Some of us may only spend one year in the lake; others as much as a decade. Some may find themselves in the lake in their thirties or forties, then in another lake downstream again in their fifties.

During the middle years we each come to episodes of self-assessment when we wonder if we have taken the right path. We ask, “Who have I become? How did I get here? Is this who I really am and want to be? How can I reinvent myself so the rest of my journey really matters?” It is a time of introspection and self-examination.

We will find ourselves asking “real” questions. Either we have achieved our goals and are wondering, *So what? Where do I go from here?* Or we failed and are wondering, *Why me? What happens now?*

## MAKING MIDLIFE CHANGES

Because of what happened to Donald, the man I mentioned in the introduction, throughout my thirties and forties I braced myself for a “midlife crisis.” I worried that I would desert my senses, make horrible mistakes, embarrass my family, and become a fool. That never happened. Instead, at around thirty-seven, as my tired ship pulled unnoticed into the lake, I became bored. I yearned for a “new thing.” I craved a more “spiritual” life. But I didn’t know what to do.

Then a “northeaster” swept across the lake, and I found myself leaping into the lifeboat. For the next nine years I bobbed like a cork on sometimes calm, sometimes stormy waters. My midlife “lake” experience was a mini-series of twenty or so reassessments, adjustments, and reorganizations. I thank God for those nine years. I became a stronger, more intentional person from those years of fighting the elements in my lonely little lifeboat. While the boat I built during the first half sank, God gave me a life raft that would not sink.

I made three major changes while navigating the midlife lake. First, I changed careers after nineteen years. For six years I sensed a new “calling” and direction. Finally, while bobbing about in the storm, I did something about it. I thank God for the storm. The increase in meaning and purpose more than makes up for the short-term pain. It was, in hindsight, a cheap price to pay.

Second, I changed the core value of my life. My highest human value had always been “competence.” I have always loved to observe anything done well. My obsession with excellence, though, left a vacuum in my soul for “beauty.” Now I look for the beauty in all of God’s creation, whether people, places, or ideas. Also, after eighteen years in the same house, we moved to a home that captures the grace of “old” architectural ideas reminiscent of America’s colonial period.

Third, I became a recovering materialist. I stopped pursuing money as a coequal goal with God. I reorganized my schedule to permit more time alone with God each day. These three changes, for me, were huge. Over a nine-year period, without my going off the deep end, God helped me reinvent myself for the second half of my journey. What major changes have you made, or thought of making?

## TRIGGERS

The next two decades will be phenomenally exciting as seventy-five million baby boomers (born 1946–1964), racing through the crowded canals of our shrink-wrapped culture, find themselves drifting in the lake. In the next twenty years millions of people will reorganize and reinvent themselves for the second half of their productive adult lives.

In early 1997 David Letterman turned fifty. He said, “This is the first birthday that’s gotten my attention since I turned twenty-one when that was the legal drinking age. It dawned on me that there’s no U-turn on this road.” For Letterman, the river apparently dumped him into the lake at fifty.

For some, the trip wire for this experience is an event—a birthday, achieving a life goal, a silent house, the birth of a grandchild, a look in the mirror. For others, it’s more like a silent alarm triggered by a barely visible accumulation of imperceptible changes that cannot be put into words. Still others pass into the lake through a calamity like the loss of a job or business, a brush with death, or the loss of a parent. Yet others feel a growing sadness and loss of spunk—one person described it as hitting a “wall of molasses.”

## WHAT ABOUT “A CRISIS AT THE MIDDLE OF LIFE”?

Twenty-five years ago the idea of “a midlife crisis at forty” was valuable because culture was still fairly homogeneous. In today’s “choice” culture the mouth of the lake can easily open up ten years earlier or shift fifteen years further downstream. So the feeling that it’s time to “reinvent” can come at a variety of ages.

## THE WORD “MIDLIFE” AND A POSITIVE APPROACH

The use of the word “midlife” is the true conundrum for this book, a Gordian knot. It carries a lot of baggage.

The word “midlife” sends a negative message that you’re getting older in a culture where older often means “no longer useful.” Yet, because of prior usage, no other word gives quite the same “shorthand” meaning about the time period we are talking about. Still, the term con-

fuses people and doesn't really express what we are talking about—a season of reinventing yourself for the second half of the journey.

What's the answer? We cannot jettison the “midlife” word itself because it is so integral to the common body of thought on this subject. But we can use many other words to enrich and nuance our meaning. We need to create a new positive language that redefines the “conversation” about the midlife experience. So from the very start, we will weave into every part of every chapter that this book is about reinventing yourself for the rest of the journey, giving visible, positive brush strokes from cover to cover.

## WHY WE NEED TO REINVENT AT ALL

Today most people will have either reached their life goals, decided those goals cannot be met, or be living through the death of their dream. The point is, they are at a “point.” Because in today's world they now have twenty, thirty, or more years of productive life remaining, they possess the unique opportunity to reinvent themselves for the rest of the journey.

The old paradigm was “over the hill.” So to be at the midpoint was to be “on” the hill. The only prospect was to go downhill. I think today's midpoint is more like standing on a plateau than lying draped over the top of a hill, looking down. Still, it took a lot of huffing and puffing to climb up to that plateau. We may even be a little slumped over trying to catch a breath and decide where to go from here. What we need now is to gather second wind for the second half of the climb.

## FOCUS QUESTIONS

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1. Are you in the midlife lake? If so, how long has it been, and do you see any end in sight?
2. Which description would best characterize your midlife experience, and why:
  - Business as usual?
  - A slight slowdown?
  - A slump?

- A funk?
  - An all-out crisis?
3. Which of these scenarios best describes you, and why?
    - I achieved my goals and wonder, *So what? Where do I go from here?*
    - I didn't get what I wanted and wonder, *Why me? What happens now?*
    - I am content.
  4. Ask yourself these questions of self-assessment:
    - Who have I become?
    - How did I get here?
    - Have I become who I wanted to be?
  5. What have been your preconceived notions about the second half of life? (Think in terms of life expectancy, concept of retirement, what you will give yourself to.) How has your thinking been challenged in this chapter?
  6. What are the areas of your life where you need to find a second wind? What major changes have you made or thought of making?
  7. Where do you visualize yourself living and what do you visualize yourself doing at fifty-five? sixty-five? seventy-five?