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The Middle-Age Surge

David Brooks MARCH 22, 2016

The phrase almost completes itself: Midlife ... crisis. It's the stage in the middle of the journey when people feel youth vanishing, their prospects narrowing and death approaching. So they become undone. The red Corvette pops up in the driveway. Stupidity reigns.

There's only one problem with the cliché. It isn't true.

"In fact, there is almost no hard evidence for midlife crisis at all, other than a few small pilot studies conducted decades ago," Barbara Bradley Hagerty writes in her new book, "Life Reimagined." The vast bulk of the research shows that there may be a pause, or a shifting of gears in the 40s or 50s, but this shift "can be exhilarating, rather than terrifying."

Bradley Hagerty looks at some of the features of people who turn midlife into a rebirth. They break routines, because "autopilot is death." They choose purpose over happiness — having a clear sense of purpose even reduces the risk of Alzheimer's. They put relationships at the foreground, as career often recedes.

"Life Reimagined" paints a portrait of middle age that is far from grim and decelerating. Midlife begins to seem like the second big phase of decision-making. Your identity has been formed; you know who you are; you've built up your resources; and now you have the chance to take the big risks precisely because your foundation is already secure.

The theologian Karl Barth described midlife in precisely this way. At middle age, he wrote, "the sowing is behind; now is the time to reap. The run has been taken; now is the time to leap. Preparation has been made; now is the time for the venture of the work itself."

The middle-aged person, Barth continued, can see death in the distance, but moves with a "measured haste" to get big new things done while there is still time.

What Barth wrote decades ago is even truer today. People are healthy and energetic longer. We have presidential candidates running for their first term in office at age 68, 69 and 74. Greater longevity is changing the narrative structure of life itself.

The elongation of vital life has changed the phases of life. The most obvious change is the emergence of the odyssey years. People between age 20 and the early 30s can now take a little more time to try on new career options, new cities and new partners.

However, another profound but more hidden change is the altered shape of middle age. What could have been considered the beginning of a descent is now a potential turning point — the turning point you are most equipped to take full advantage of.

It is the moment when you can look back on your life so far and see it with different eyes. Hopefully you've built up some wisdom, which, as the psychologists define it, means seeing the world with more compassion, grasping opposing ideas at the same time, tolerating ambiguity and reacting with equanimity to the small setbacks of life.

By middle age you might begin to see, retrospectively, the dominant motifs that have been running through your various decisions. You might begin to see how all your different commitments can be integrated into one meaning and purpose. You might see the social problem your past has made you uniquely equipped to tackle. You might have enough clarity by now to orient your life around a true north on some ultimate horizon.

Lincoln, for example, found in midlife that everything so far had prepared him to preserve the Union and end slavery. The rest of us don't have causes that grand, but plenty of people bring their life to a point. They dive fully into existing commitments, or embrace new ones.

Either way, with a little maturity, they're less likely by middle age to be blinded by ego, more likely to know what it is they actually desire, more likely to get out of their own way, and maybe a little less likely, given all the judgments that have been made, to care about what other people think.

The people who find meaning at this stage often realize the way up is down.

They get off that supervisor's perch and put themselves in direct contact with the people they can help the most. They accept that certain glorious youthful dreams won't be realized, but other, more relational jobs turn out to be more fulfilling.

They achieve a kind of tranquillity, not because they've decided to do nothing, but because they've achieved focus and purity of will. They have enough self-confidence, and impatience, to say no to some things so they can say yes to others.

From this perspective, middle age is kind of inspiring. Many of life's possibilities are now closed, but limitation is often liberating. The remaining possibilities can be seized more bravely, and lived more deeply.

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