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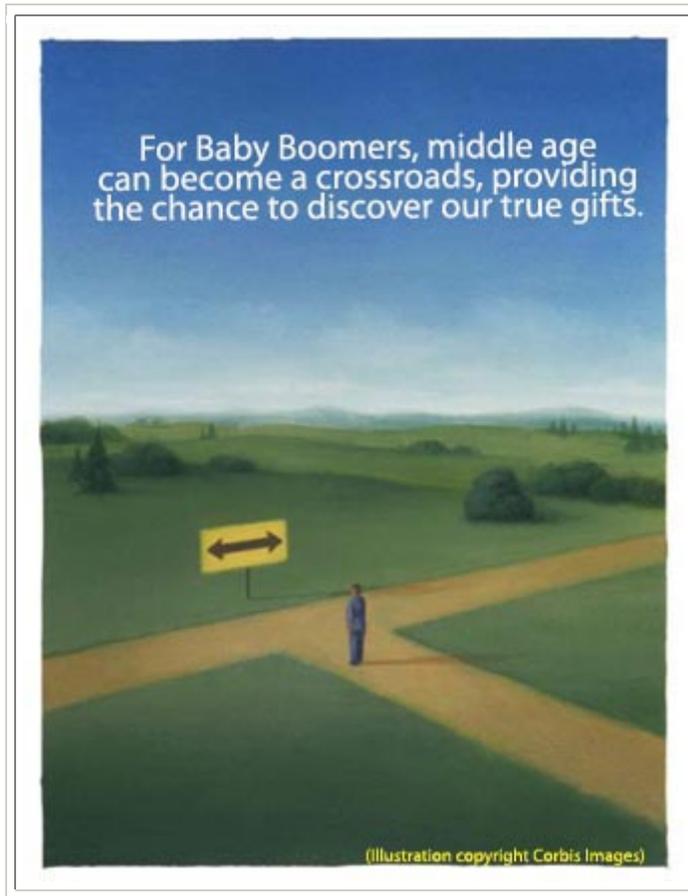
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A (mid)Life Worth Living



By Patricia Healy Locke '76

If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say both as a writer and a preacher, it would be something like this: Listen to your life.” — Frederick Buechner

Listening to my life has been both the hardest and the most essential work I’ve ever done. It is work that doesn’t come naturally to most of us, or if it does, there are plenty of well-meaning people and institutions ready to tell us we’re impractical for doing such a thing. Although, if we distill the whole of a liberal arts education down to its most basic structure, the bones we find at the center would arguably have at their marrow just that: Here is where you learn to listen to your life.

It’s pretty ironic, then, that as a student at Illinois Wesleyan University, I did as little listening for my selfhood as humanly

possible. It wasn’t that IWU didn’t offer, entice, suggest, or outright demand such an exercise; I just seemed to have missed the crucial point. Consistent encouragement was offered me, yet I interpreted this necessity as a luxury. For many of my fellow Illinois Wesleyan students, however, the message came through loud and clear. They pursued their gifts with a passion — and never looked back.

For others, that message may take longer to reveal itself. The generation of Baby Boomers (technically defined as those Americans born between 1946 and 1964) are finding, in midlife, that they are finally close to answering that inevitable question we have heard asked, practically since we could first comprehend words: “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

In my opinion, the earliest phrasing of this question is the correct one: “What do you want to *be* when you grow up?” Somewhere around high school, the question subtly morphs into, “What do you want to *do* with your life?” The message was pretty clear, to me at any rate: life was about doing, not being. I was going to be judged not as a human being, but as a human *doing*.

This can be a tricky distinction for a Baby Boomer. Idealistic in our younger days, perhaps to a fault, many of us were determined to break away from the Depression-scarred fears of our parents’ generation. In our choices of politics, music, even spirituality, we felt imbued with the

unique capacity to determine what really mattered. We were going to reject materialism. We wanted to live life on our own terms, not by some cookie-cutter preconception of how we were told those lives should be.

But some interesting things happened on the road to our adulthoods. With a 90-percent high school graduation rate, and more than a quarter of us holding at least a bachelor's degree, Baby Boomers have become better educated and more affluent than any previous generation. According to one study, in 2001 the top quartile of Boomers had a median income of \$100,000 and a median net worth of \$360,000. Three-fourths of us own our homes, and almost 75 percent have some form of investments. These statistics reveal that, somewhere along the line, many of us must have decided we could put our idealism on hold, or at least to practical use.

However, despite being “better off” than our parents’ generation, many Boomers are asking for more. The childhood question has come full circle. With the time remaining to us, many are beginning to rethink what we truly want to be.

In his book *Let Your Life Speak*, author and educator Parker Palmer writes, “Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you.” In my case, it took years to listen at all. While a student at IWU, I made a commitment to theatre arts and ignored the seductive call of the English department. Never mind I was really not a very good actor, and deep down inside a little drum began to beat. ‘Write, write, write, write,’ it rumbled, with increasingly annoying persistence. However, good writing demands the creation of a certain amount of “space” in our lives — space to observe and record, much the same way that good listening requires “being” rather than “doing.”

By my senior year, none of this seemed remotely practical, and panic set in. I needed that entry-level job, and I needed it now! That panic led me to a sympathetic professor, who led me to the field of publishing, where I attended to other people’s writing. My college sweetheart and I married, and we moved around the Midwest with each of his job transfers. I embarked on a career in advertising, where I did finally write — but at other people’s direction and discretion. Then children began to arrive. I waddled through pregnancy and motherhood, covered with spit up and grape jelly, and learned to write frantically while babies napped.

Then, suddenly, everything changed. Finding the strength to go on in the wake of my husband’s death of cancer at age 36 was one of the hardest challenges of my life. Through the experience, I gained a kind of inner courage, borne of necessity, but the demands of raising two children on my own kept my focus narrowed in those years.

As my children grew to young adulthood, however, I discovered that the nurture I had so loved to provide them began to wind down, or at least change. Parenthood had used only a part of who I am, true, but a part I enjoy using. The writing drumbeat was another part, one that refused to go away, but it was becoming increasingly more difficult to want to use this gift in ways I had used it in the past. Most importantly, the years began to whisper that, maybe, it wasn't so self-indulgent to listen to my life, after all. Making time and space was hard, important work, and I discovered the blessing of midlife was the ability to say, "This is who I am. No apologies needed. I worked darned hard to get here."



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— Patricia Locke, shown at left with her daughter Ashley, who is a senior at Illinois Wesleyan

While exhilarating, negotiating our way through this midlife crossroads can be extremely stressful. Baby Boomers have not been shy about getting professional help to guide them through this difficult passage. David Steindorf '61, a clinical psychologist in private practice in New York, says that his Baby Boomer patients often come to him in a state of generalized anxiety, not knowing exactly what's bothering them. But for many, after talking for a while, it becomes apparent that job stress is at the root of their problem. "We uncover the idea that the person feels they've made a mistake in choosing a career."

Warren Kistner '83, who is director of Illinois Wesleyan's Career Center, says, "I see many alumni in our office, in all stages of life — from just out of school through the middle years. At midlife some are making a career transition out of necessity, or there may be the nagging feeling they've chosen their career for the wrong reasons."

As many discover in midlife, a career can leave us as suddenly and heartbreakingly as a lover. The field wants "younger people" — those fluent in new technologies and willing to work at the sacrifice of all else. Or perhaps we do the leaving because we've exhausted all the field has to offer, or the market is changing and we must return to school to succeed. Or maybe some catastrophic or life-changing event occurs that suddenly transforms and forever alters our perspective.

Whether you decide that it's time for a change or instead have that decision forced upon you, the challenge remains figuring out a new course of direction. But, Steindorf believes, you are more capable in midlife to make that decision than perhaps you've ever been. "Your idea of who you are is different at 40 than at 20," Steindorf says. "You've learned more about who you are over time."

For many, that moment of self-realization is accompanied by the need to give something back, to be of service, to make a difference. As Douglas Brouwer, a Presbyterian pastor and author, writes: “Most of the people I’ve known over the years — people who live their lives with a strong sense of purpose and meaning — have also lived with an obvious sense of duty, obligation, commitment, and sacrifice. And so I think there’s a connection here that we should explore. . . . If we began to live our lives with a sense of service, we would feel far more satisfaction with our lives, far more pride in what we do, far more meaning in our work.”

What I have discovered to be true for me is that some of the “duty, obligation, commitment, and sacrifice” I made over the years was situationally necessary — but the largest part has been freely chosen. These were the parts of my life that I wanted to keep — even though, by my mid-forties, I was eager to jettison almost the whole of the rest of it. Advertising, for example, could not be drop-kicked out the window of my life fast enough.

I have now, finally, chosen my path, and I know it is the right one, because that’s exactly how it feels. This fall, I enrolled in seminary and am working my way — at age 50 — toward becoming a Presbyterian pastor. Perhaps the biggest surprise to me is finding that those most important parts of my life — writing, nurturing, service — are clicking into place in a way they have never done before. Or maybe could not have done before.

Laura Harding Koppenhoefer ’83 says of her similar transition from nursing and teaching to the Lutheran ministry, “All the pieces come together when you’re called to be who you are.”

In a few brief lines, poet May Sarton sums it up best:

Now I become myself. It’s taken
Time, many years and places;
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people’s faces . . .

Listening to our lives is hard work. Perhaps it is fitting that so many of us, in our middle years, are just now able to push the pause button and look around for what life has planned for us all along. Maybe the health and wealth that Baby Boomers enjoy is a gift that allows us the time and energy to reexamine our goals. The bumps and bruises and struggles of living can be a tremendous burden, but the good news is that they can also be life-transforming. We can take a deep breath and declare at last: “Now I become myself.”