

The Day I Realized I was 40 and Had No Idea How I Got There

Youth / Virtues and values

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Let's start with some frank admissions: My name is Samuel. I'm a white, British male in my early forties, a teacher in a provincial town, somewhere near London that you've never heard of. I've been married for twelve years and I live in an average, middle class neighborhood. I have four kids, four chickens and one ten-year-old people carrier. Ostensibly, my life is mediocre. Except, perhaps, for the chickens; keeping chickens is practically hipster.

Once upon a time, I used to live and work abroad, converse the whole day in a foreign language, travel around Europe like it was my backyard, work for an exciting business (hybrid airships, anyone?), have exotic girlfriends who lived in exotic places, meet dozens of equally carefree friends in shiny bars whenever I liked. And do you know what the best thing was? I had plans! Lots of plans to do lots of things.

Then, suddenly, just over a year ago, I woke up one morning and realized I was a 40-year-old teacher in a provincial town, married with kids and driving a beat-up people carrier. What the hell just happened?! I loved being in my twenties and thirties. I loved the excitement of studying, traveling, meeting people, dating, marrying, establishing a family, buying a house, building a career, starting a business on the side. Oh, there were some bad moments but, generally, I loved the novelty of my life.

One by one, all the pathways that stretched ahead of me twenty years ago, so ripe with potency and promise, have been shut down, as I've made one choice over another, one decision instead of another, committed to one situation and not another. The road that I've finally arrived on appears to have tapered to such an extent that it's reached a dead end. The youthful restlessness that was once my driving force is now a rattling insect trapped in a box. Plans have been shelved, ambitions left unfulfilled, symphonies unfinished. And here I am; merely a husband, a father, a teacher.

I realize, by this stage, that I'm sounding like an ungrateful old goat, bleating churlishly about a life that many wish they could have even a small part of – wife, children, house, car, job, health, security. And it troubles me, this dissatisfaction with what I already have. This inconsummate longing for more.

Thus it was a relief and a revelation to find an answer in this article from one of my favorite spiritual directors, Fr Ron Rolheiser. In it, he writes:

One form of restlessness that many of us share in common ... is a sense of feeling trapped in certain marriages, families, vocations, careers, churches, jobs and locations which frustrate us, but which, for all kinds of reasons, we feel powerless to ever leave. Hence, we live in a state of dissatisfaction and restlessness, unable really to make peace with our lot in life and yet unable to leave it either. [...] What we see ... is a perpetual kicking against the goad, a cancer of spirit, a refusal to accept one's lot in life, an incapacity to make peace with what one is in fact living.

Well, that told me! But the real revelation came in the next paragraph:

How do we move beyond this kind of restlessness? There is an old adage ... that reads: If you can't get out of something ... get more deeply into it.

If you can't get out of something, get more deeply into it! As that line began to sink in, I felt a mixture of excitement and fear. Excitement that I'd found an answer to my agitation; fear, as I knew instinctively the answer was going to draw me acutely and inexorably into the shadowlands: "Truly I tell you, when you were young you put on your own belt and walked where you liked; but when you grow old you will stretch out your hands, and somebody else will put a belt around you and take you where you would rather not go" (Jn. 21:18).

Get more deeply in. This simple phrase, so compelling, so illogical, wills me to enter more fully, more completely, more concretely into the very things that have characterized my discontent! Married life. Family life. My job. Get more deeply in! It implies both a turning point and a point of no return. It feels gritty and visceral. It suggests that it's time to roll up my sleeves and get my hands dirty. Rather than 'run away from', it's 'turn and run into'. It sounds like a crazy invitation to something profound and life-changing, but I have no idea what that is going to be. I feel like Neo in the film, *The Matrix*, brought reeling to the edge of a critical but inescapable choice:

"This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill—the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill—you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. Remember: all I'm offering is the truth. Nothing more."

Like Neo, I could never take the blue pill. But I've an unnerving misgiving about taking the red pill. If I take the red pill, this is what I think will happen:

I will have to go through a process of letting go – and it will be painful

In order to go deeper into the things that matter, I will have to discard the things that don't. My personal plans, my own desires, the projections of myself as the person I want people to see, will all have to go. I've already had my first piece of collateral damage, as I've decided to close my business. For the last few years I've been running a tuition center alongside my full-time job. It's a busy occupation and takes me away from my family for a few extra hours each evening and on weekends. Letting go means making some painful decisions: I'll be closing the center, just as I was about to expand operations; this in turn means laying off committed staff; disappointing my students; giving in to my competitors and losing the kudos of running the best tuition center in town. I sense the critical scrutiny of friends and family and their unspoken incredulity, "What on earth is he doing, when it was all going so well?" On the plus side, I already feel an enormous sense of relief. But I'm sure this won't be the only thing I will have to let go of.

I will have to embrace the reality of my present situation – and that, too, will be painful

To some extent, chasing new projects has been a way of avoiding the monotony of my current existence. I don't like being a state school teacher. I love my students but hate the administrative pressures of the job. I don't find it easy to pay attention to detail, and administration emphasizes this particular weakness of my character and makes me feel vulnerable. If I won the lottery, I would leave teaching immediately. But that's not going to happen and I sense a deep-seated resentment towards a job that exposes my flaws rather than utilizes my strengths. So the mandate to get 'deeper in' is going to have huge implications for how I approach my work. I'm going to have to radically change my attitude to my job!

I will not be able to do this in half measures

It would seem peculiar to only accept the challenge with regard to some aspects of my life and not to others. 'Going deeper' appears to require the total commitment of myself to my life; I cannot choose to take it seriously in one area while remaining frivolous in others; I'm sure I could not, for example, earnestly probe the mysteries of our marriage whilst taking a blithe approach to our finances, our prayer life, our recreation. It would be like trying to plunge into the ocean whilst aiming to keeping my feet in the shallows.

I will be tempted to give up

Even writing this piece makes me want to give up. I'm experiencing fatigue even before I've really started. I feel like forgetting the whole thing, deleting this document, pouring a glass of whisky and browsing through Netflix. But what's the alternative? A constant, nagging suspicion that my life is unaccomplished.

I will achieve less – but I will become more

The focus on my business has meant missed mealtimes, missed play time and prayer time with my children. Going deeper into family life will mean using the gift of extra time to more abundantly embrace my fatherhood. Already there is a look of pleasure and surprise on my children's faces as they ask, "Aren't you going out this evening?!" Only the other day, I spent an hour at the kitchen table helping my sons with their homework. Here was a chance to get to know them through the simple action of working alongside them, trying to understand how they learn, what motivates them, how they approach a challenge, how they respond to failure or achievement. What an insight into the minds of my boys! And what an opportunity as a father to experience how I intimately influence their lives and shape their understanding of the world.

I will discover something – and it might even be myself

I'm cynical when it comes to looking for spiritual signs, but dammit my mind was quietly blown when, writing this article on the Feast of St Francis de Sales, I came across a quote attributed to him: "Desire to be what you are and to be good at what you are; all your thoughts should be directed to perfecting yourself in this. Be ready to carry all the crosses you will be asked to bear in the process. Believe me, it is a great secret, but one that is least understood in the spiritual life, because everyone loves to do his own thing and few want to live according to the plan and wishes of Our Lord."

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