

Mid-Life & Counting: Where Work, Play and Spirit Meld

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I want to begin tonight by singing a song that I adapted from one about work that Johnny Cash made famous in the 1950s. Some of you may recognize it and will, I hope, find it a rueful and somewhat amusing assessment of the human condition and work that could be included in our repertoire at almost any stage of working adulthood. We all might identify with it at one time or another in our working lives, I think.

The Good Book says we are made out of mud;
Humans from the humus who are flesh and blood:
Flesh and blood, skin and bone,
With hearts so soft and minds of our own.

We work all day and what do we get?
Another day older and deeper in debt.
St. Peter don't you call us 'cause we can't go.
We owe our souls . . . and a little bit more!

(Adapted from the song, "Sixteen Tons")

Now, the following reading sounds like a well-tempered expression of the best of the potential we have as people of faith. It sounds very much as though it was penned by well-seasoned Friends who had reached into their deepest spiritual selves at mid-life and drew a working map for those of us who follow.

ADVICES (IV)

(London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1964)

". . . *Live Adventurously*. In every situation seek to be aware of the presence of God, praying that spiritual energies in yourself and in others may be released for the furtherance of God's kingdom. Life brings many conflicting responsibilities and choices. To one, the summons may come to apply oneself with fresh energy and vision to present work; to another, to make a complete change, perhaps even to retire early or to limit engagements, so that freedom for new service of God's appointing may be found. When you have a choice of employment, choose that which gives the fullest opportunity for the use of your talents in the service of God and all humanity."

These Friends seem to know and articulate what it's like to be at mid-life and counting—that time of life when we begin to come closer to merging the many facets of work and play, mind and spirit than we ever dreamed possible in our younger years. I notice one thing, though. Even though we are advised to live adventurously, this advice doesn't cover play as a part of work. Ever since I was very young, I've always had the idea that whatever was adventurous was exciting, and what is exciting is fun—at least to me. And what is fun is, by definition for me, play—or some near semblance of it. So I think mid-life is a good time to "seriously" consider, what role "play" plays in our working lives.

Despite our country's Puritan work ethic and culture (and that of early Friends, I might add), I'm certain that God did not create us to work—or at least not just to a dreary, dull kind of work existence. No. God created us to play! The Garden of Eden story in Genesis is one of many that show us how we let our minds, our free will, lead us (literally) down the garden path when we forget to focus on the One from whom we came and to whom we will return.

Look again at the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Sounds like they were handed life on a silver platter, and got into trouble because they had too little to do and too much time on their hands. We've all heard the warning about idle minds, right? Maybe their "banishment" from the Garden of Eden to the world of work wasn't punishment at all. Maybe God was just trying to keep them (and us) occupied and out of worse trouble! But does that mean that we can't play a little while we work? Having made it this far doing it the hard way, I say "hooray" for play, whenever and wherever we can find it—especially at or in work since we spend so much time and energy there.

Biblical stories aside, we do live in a world in where work is the norm. Our minds (and our time) are too fully occupied now. We seem to have found another kind of trouble. We are so busy that we are easily distracted from God and our deepest selves, and still so easily led down the garden path. And it is easy, isn't it? We forget, over and over again, to focus on God. Instead, most of the time we focus on ourselves, on our families, on earning a living, on the parts of our lives that are most real at the moment and the most pressing. Unfortunately, we often feel as though we have no choice. We are certainly led and encouraged to do so by circumstance and culture. We are all too human. But are we being fully human? That question sneaks into our consciousness from time to time as we attain adulthood, but at mid-life our hearts and minds begin to bring it into sharper and more persistent focus.

Mid-life, middle age—whatever you want to call this time of life—has been analyzed, explored, investigated, talked about, speculated on, and written about ad infinitum. But only lately. Back in the olden days that my kids tease me about, when I was studying psychology and human development, not much was said about this time of our lives. We were full of stages of development as children, and then we were adults. Period. I have been trying to recall studies or reading from other disciplines that focused on this wonderful stage of life, and I cannot remember many.

In popular literature and lore, middle age seems generally to be a dull, dreary, dreaded stage of life. Even classic literary works that portray middle age seem to be about people leading lives of dullness, neurosis, despair or crisis. (*Life of a Salesman*, *Mac Beth*, some of the Hardy novels, to name a tiny few.) Only if you look carefully around the periphery of such stories do you begin to see secondary mid-life characters who seem grounded in well-being and happiness. In the Bible, only a few well-adjusted, happy mid-life characters seem to stand out, and look what peripheral roles they play in our overall impression of the ebb and flow of biblical stories. Old people and young people seem to get all the juicy parts. I guess we middle aged people just don't make exciting reading.

But is that really true? Think of the adventures of those middle aged apostles Peter and Paul in the New Testament. Think of Miriam and of Moses in his later years. Think of the impact that biblical wisdom literature has had on our religion and culture. Keep thinking while I try to correct that erroneous impression about middle age. The key here is adventurousness—supposedly the exclusive turf of the young. Those of us who are of

that certain age or older can look back on a life full of twists and turns we never would have dreamed possible. To get from there to here required, at the very least, putting one foot ahead of the other, day after day, and moving on with our lives. Sometimes we had hope, vision, courage, faithfulness. Sometimes we just hung in there. Sometimes we almost despaired and wanted to turn back. But we couldn't. If that hasn't been an adventure, I don't know what is one.

So here we are. At mid-life and counting. We have achieved a freedom that comes only with making it this far. Most of us have gained some wisdom along the way. Many of us have gained insight into ourselves and others. Lots of us have found better relationships with our families, with one another, and most importantly, with God. We did it mostly by trial and error and with the help and grace of God, and of God's loving, faithful servants along the way—even if we and they didn't realize it. And, if we were very, very lucky, blessed, or perceptive of what God wanted for us, we learned how to play again. Psychologists and developmental studies document that play is the work of childhood. I suggest that play and adventure should also be included in the work of adulthood.

What do a sense of adventurousness and playfulness have to do with work and career? Everything. Maybe I can illustrate this by telling you a bit about myself, and you can think of parallels in your own or others' lives.

I grew up in a family of nine children. My father was the most playful adult I ever knew, then or now. My mother was possibly the least playful, though I do not mean that she was dour. My father had some very impractical ideas about "fun" things that we should do as a family, especially given that there were nine children, but he never could have brought any of it off. My mother was the one who carried the ideas through to completion. My father was the playwright, if you will, and my mother was the producer and director who staged very successful shows. For instance, I remember driving for what must have been 12 hours to Chicago to visit an aunt and go wading in Lake Michigan and eating marvelous shrimp at the docks. Then we turned around and drove home again, stopping along the way to "camp" long enough to sleep and eat breakfast. My mother was in charge of food, keeping the peace in the car, keeping track of us, blankets, and pillows, and generally everything except driving.

On another occasion, we took the one and only vacation we ever had, with probably six of us children and my grandfather packed in the car. We drove to the Ozarks, camped out and stayed in what were then called tourist cabins, and ate, for the most part, only food that my mother cooked on the road at these various camp sites or cabins. We had a marvelous time with much arguing and fussing enjoyed by all—except my mother whom we drove nuts, I think.

Mother often arranged some last minute excursion or other event my dad dreamed up, like a camping trip down to the river for instance. (Always from sundown to sunup only, for he owned a little grocery store that was open seven days a week.) I don't know how she did it all. While I remember her not wanting to do some extravagant thing my dad might dream up, when she agreed, we all had a good time. I guess that was part of her work, and so from both my mother and my dad, I learned early on that work and play were both important, though work did seem to take precedence most of the time.

I was married very young (too young, I now know) and I went directly from my parents' house to my husband's house. After being a full time mom for about ten years, I went

back to college part time and finished my degree. I worked as a research psychologist and an administrator in a medical school and hospital. Shortly after I went to work, I was divorced and forced to cope with life by myself as a single mother of two teenagers. I realize now that our long years of family dysfunction had driven away most of the sense of fun and enjoyment we could have had with one another. My career was going very well though. I worked long and hard, was studying for a graduate degree, and getting regular promotions or new and exciting jobs. But it was a frightening and difficult time, financially, emotionally, and spiritually. My world, the world that meant the most to me, was falling apart.

Then I met my future husband and did a controversial human potential movement course where I relearned exactly how important family and other relationships are to me. I made lots of mistakes but I set about trying to heal and transform whatever broken relationships that I could. I got engaged which, of course, made life with my children even more disagreeable. I kept trying to heal myself and my children with more or less success, but something big was obviously missing. I had left the Catholic Church when I got divorced and hadn't thought of another church that I felt I could belong to 100%. I toyed with ideas of eastern religions, but not in a serious way. And then I became a Friend when I was 40 years old.

What a monumental experience! After volunteering in a program sponsored by Quakers (about whom I knew next to nothing), I became curious about what so influenced their lives. I decided to go to a Meeting near my home. I walked into a cool, dim meetinghouse one steamy Sunday morning in July, sat down in the stillness waiting for the service to start, listened to the ministry of words and silence, and knew right then and there that I was a Friend. I had never experienced the presence of God in such a powerful way. Even though I knew absolutely nothing at all about this religion, I knew everything I needed to know. I started going to meeting for worship regularly. I read everything about the Religious Society of Friends I could get my hands on and learned everything I could from my wonderful Lansdowne Friends community. I surprised everyone in the meeting by becoming a member within six months. Then I was married under the care of the meeting. As my life truly began to be transformed, its separate pieces began to be knit together. Family, work, play, relationships, worship, ministry—life was opened to me when I opened my heart and my mind. God walked in.

I began to discern that I had some ministry to prepare for, but I didn't have a clue as to what it was. All I knew was that I was being called to go to the Earlham School of Religion in Richmond, Indiana, of all places. This after leaving my university hospital career to run a small printing business with my husband who had also left a prosperous career with a large corporation to start the business. So after an intense inner struggle with this daft idea and a series of discussions with a very surprised and initially skeptical husband (who is not a Friend), we sold the store, rented out our home, and, in my mid-forties, I left home and career to focus entirely and intensively on preparing for ministry. And in the process I discovered what and how simple it was: telling people about God.

Since I returned to Philadelphia, I have managed book and magazine publishing for Friends and for private businesses. I have taught among Friends in the United States and England, and I have written some things for Friends in Russia and in the U.S. I still occasionally lead retreats and workshops for Friends. I've discarded the whole notion of "career" and taken up learning who I am. And guess what? This is it. I am a woman. I am a minister. I am and always have been an entrepreneur. I am a wife, a mom, and most

especially a grandmother. I'm a gardener, a movie buff, lover of good reading, a writer . . . all sorts of things that don't seem to go together. But they are me.

Currently, I own a small store and coffee shop in a very large office building in Center City which I love. I find that much of my ministry now takes place there—though not in any way that I had originally envisioned—for the ministry of listening, of serving, and of laughter and play make a critical difference to those whose jobs and careers tend to consume them. I open myself to my customers and often God peeps out of their eyes at me and invites me in to play.

Just what does all this have to do with mid-life? I used to be different, but now I'm the same. If I hadn't been blessed with a father *and* a mother who imparted a strong sense of adventure, play, and doing what is needed to get the job done, I suspect that I would have remained stuck in unhappiness, stuck in a past life, or stuck in feeling unfulfilled. My sense of adventure and playfulness has emerged fully in mid-life as a kind of marvelous energy that fuels and focuses whatever my direction. I have discovered who I am, what I want and need from life, and what I am willing and able to give. Because my children have left home, I am freer to do many things that were previously not possible. My husband is tremendously loving, playful, and supportive.

Middle age crises never happened for me, at least not the ones you read about in books. (Oh, I have plenty of crises, just not the so called middle age ones.) Even menopause has been just one more interesting step along the road. I like and admire who I am and who I am continuing to become. I know ever more fully what I have to contribute to my family, to others. I have learned better how to listen to God, though I don't always. Work and play and ministry have merged, though I still get pulled too far in the direction of work than is good for me, my family, and my relationship with God. But I am working on it. I keep reminding myself of our testimony of simplicity—of striving to keep inwardly clear of things that distract from my relationship with God. And, frankly, owning my own business does that all the time, so I need all the help I can get.

That leads to one of the most difficult areas for me to touch on tonight, which has to do with the question of what spiritual assistance our meetings can be with our work and careers. Put quite bluntly: nothing. What! you say. Why? Because of who we are, Friends.

Take a look at what our meetings are: just little do-it-yourself religious communities (if we can stretch considerably the concept of community to cover what we encounter in most meetings). Today, we appear to be unwilling or unable to make the commitment of time, energy, and attention our meetings need. And we appear to be unwilling to invite or allow our fellow members into our personal and work lives so that we could come fully under the spiritual authority of our meeting community. We appear to have forgotten that our spiritual and temporal lives and communities are supposed to conform to each another.

A meeting has no more nor less spiritual power than is created by its members and their total or less than total commitment to the creation of a worshipping community that transcends human limitations. When, and only when, we come to meeting for worship and to meeting for worship for business with hearts and minds prepared and still will we experience the transforming presence of God and learn what we must be and do as individuals and as a spiritual, religious community. Until and unless we can once again grant the kind of time, energy, and total spiritual authority to the corporate gathered

body of the meeting that Friends once did, our meetings (and, so by default, we) will remain powerless. Unless we surrender self and the rampant individualism that has been loosed even among Friends, we will remain powerless.

If and when we learn again to be faithful, obedient servants, then we will learn how to discern who God created us to be, what God wants us to do in the world, and be empowered to do it. When our meetings once again become worshipping communities gathered under the leadership of the spirit of Christ, then we will leave meeting for worship refreshed and transformed. Then we will be empowered to "walk cheerfully over the earth [yes, even through our workplaces] answering that of God in everyone." In other words, in the sense that George Fox intended with that statement, we will hold everyone accountable for being a child of God and acting accordingly. And that is and always will be pretty darned hard to do, especially in the world of work and careers, for it is here that we most often interact with that part of life most separate from God and God's will—not to mention the threat to our livelihood such unusual behavior might pose.

The words of Robert Barclay and William Penn were never more true nor more relevant than in relation to work and career. Barclay said, "For when I came into the silent assemblies of God's people, I felt a secret power among them, which touched my heart. And as I gave way to it, I found the evil in me weakening, and the good lifted up. Thus it was that I was knit into them and united to them."

In our meetings, we can find sustenance and support. If and when we create transformed worshipping communities among ourselves, we understand better where work fits within the special part of the vision of love, harmony, justice, and well-being for all creation that God once granted Friends. We can experience the power that William Penn noted when he said, "True godliness don't turn men [and women] out of the world, but enables them to live better in it, and excites their endeavors to mend it."

Now here's the best part: if our meetings can be recreated to help God help us mend the world at work, then surely they can help us mend ourselves. And if we can learn to behave ourselves, maybe, just maybe we can stay out of trouble and God will let us go back to our real work—you guessed it! PLAY.