Columns
Spirituality



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There's a relief and a newfound vastness to your inner world when the midlife years, or middling years as I call them, become the stage for spiritual transformation. Adjectives connected with midlife years, periods of our life marked by the dark night, or major life transitions would be: difficult, overwhelming, confusing, unpleasant. Packed within these seeds of darkness, however, is the radiance of spiritual transformation that can only come about through the pressure of those dark middle years.

"Middling years" may be the typical midlife experience, but they could also be the middle period between one job and another, one stage of life and another, a major life event and the return to normalcy, a change in relationships, expectations and responsibilities. They could even be a retreat.

The maturing person passes through many "middle years" in their life. This summer's retreat followed upon 12 months of such a transition in my own life. The pressure of various changes around me in my community, my ministry and my family became overwhelming and the day I stepped foot in our retreat house I breathed a huge sigh of relief. "Here, at last, I can find some peace and quiet to sort things out."

Jesus directly intervened in that first day with a startling image from the Gospel of Luke. He showed me the man with dropsy who stood before Jesus in the synagogue one Sabbath. I knew instantly that Jesus had diagnosed my spiritual illness. I had dropsy. Dropsy is a buildup of fluid in your tissues that can lead to heart failure — and death. "And you, my child," I heard in my heart, "are in danger of heart failure. You are in danger of death. I am about to save you."

So much for peace and quiet! The next eight days, I underwent heart surgery under the action of the Divine Surgeon and Good Shepherd. Jesus brought up before me memories both recent and long past, faces of people in my life and relationships that were limping along at best, issues unresolved and problems that were incomprehensible.

During these transitional "middle years" of our life, whenever and however they may occur, even though they seem to last a long, very long time and overwhelm our capacities to the point that we feel unable to move forward ... something beautiful is happening.

The pain of what broke and confused me for the previous 12 months, sorted out by Jesus himself in my retreat, was actually a blessing that detached me from the desires and ideas that only supported my ego-self.

I had blamed the other for much of my angst, but I saw now that I was the one who had been living in a trance, living in a fantasy of my own making. I saw clearly that all of us are trying to survive and get what we think we need to be significant, or perfect, or happy.

Through the transition of our life, God leads us to enter into the inmost depth of our soul where we see something deeper than our own emotional reactions. St. Augustine described it this way, when he began to reflect upon himself. He says that he saw "with the eye of the soul, what was beyond the eye of the soul, beyond my spirit, your immutable light."

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What relief to find out that truly our struggles in these middling and messy times of life are not really as self-identifying as we feel they are. These struggles, no matter how they come to us, apply pressure on the darker and more immature parts of our mind and heart so that our eyes may see with greater clarity the light of God's radiance within our soul.

In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* Thomas Merton described it as "*le point vierge*" or the virgin point at the center of our being that is the "point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal ... the pure glory of God in us." This God-spark, so to speak, has never been touched by our weakness and sin, or sins done against us that we may carry with such sorrow.

- So what would happen, beginning today, if you gave yourself permission to nurture a heart that would free you to follow the divine thread of your life that passes through these "middling years," only in order to give you the precious gift of spiritual transformation?
- A free heart that would allow you to ...
- Peacefully explore what is happening within you and around you with curious trust.

- Pay attention to how life is moving within you and around you so that you can take your cue from God's plan for you.
- Stay in the intensity with your breath and your presence.
- Let go of the demands of the ego for significance, safety and happiness and make choices from a deeper heart-space that is guided by love.
- Surrender with the understanding that God is already taking action in your life. The wisest move is to stop paddling long enough to see which direction the water of your life is taking you and where divine providence is guiding you, and start taking responsible action in that direction.

This opening and realignment of the heart, this new vision with the "eye of the soul," will give you a deep and utter stillness that begins with the gift of grace that washes away the ego's grasping and spills over into every level of your being. You will discover in time that deep anxiety and frustration will give way to choices that promote peace and reconnect with the energy of a free heart.

May you who are in the midst of middle years, whether this is the first time or the 10th, relax under the hands of the wise Master Surgeon as he transforms the darkness of your life into the radiance of his glory.

[Kathryn James Hermes, a Daughter of St. Paul, is the author of the best-selling book *Surviving Depression: A Catholic Approach* as well as a number of other titles. She works with individuals online at pauline.org/heartwork, and her newsletter can be found at pauline.org/sisterkathryn.]