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LEARNING *to*
LOVE
MIDLIFE



12 REASONS
WHY LIFE GETS
BETTER WITH AGE

CHIP CONLEY

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LOVE
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LITTLE, BROWN SPARK

New York Boston London

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*To my two MEA cofounders, Christine Sperber and Jeff
Hamaoui.*

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LITTLE,
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Introduction: A Tale of Two Midlives

Midlife is the Rodney Dangerfield of life stages: It don't get no respect.

I stared at my ceiling, sleepless in San Francisco, knowing that I would have to fight my battles all over again tomorrow, even more exhausted.

“*What’s wrong with me?!*” That was the question that haunted me in my mid-40s. I hated my life, partly because every piece of it was falling apart. Yet I clung to those pieces as if they were a tattered life preserver.

Worse still, I felt completely alone. An idiot without a village.

Midlife is when we begin to worry that life isn’t turning out the way we expected. We may feel a sense of lost opportunity and frustrated longing. Or feel that we’ve sold out and are living someone else’s life. It’s when we can look in the mirror and see a stranger.

But once we settle into the transformative opportunity of midlife, something profound and beautiful awakens inside us. For me, this life stage has been the tale of two midlives: one very bad followed by one very good. Life does get better with age.

I deeply believe that society doesn’t understand the upside of this era. We’ve come to think—and accept—the notion that midlife is one endless sand trap on the golf course of life. Pop culture’s most common stereotype about midlife is that our only option is to imitate Kevin Spacey in *American Beauty*: Buy a red 1970 Pontiac Firebird and lust after your teenage daughter’s seductive best friend. I know, not a great look!

In short, midlife has a colossal branding problem.

The English word *midlife* dates back to 1818, but it didn’t enter the pop-culture lexicon till the mid-1960s. And it was less of a state of life than a trait. Yes, there were twentieth-century midlife markers—menopause, empty nest, parents passing away, twenty-fifth anniversary at

work—but to be experiencing midlife was also thought to mean feeling stuck, bored, and dissatisfied. Hence, it was seen almost as an affliction... and a lousy excuse for crazy, selfish behavior.

Is any other era of life yoked so consistently with the term *crisis*, defined as “a time of intense difficulty, trouble, or danger”? Sounds rotten, right? Interestingly, however, the word *crisis* is derived from the Greek word *krinein*, which means “to make a decision based upon one’s judgment.” In other words, we have agency in our lives. This sheds a different light on the midlife brand, doesn’t it? Maybe midlife is not something that happens *to* you, but a life stage that happens *for* you, one that unlocks a whole new world of choices. Wow, that just wiped my windshield clean!

Yale’s Dr. Becca Levy has shown that when we shift our perspective on aging from negative to positive, our health outcomes improve. Better balance, more openness to new experiences, better cognitive functioning, more satisfying sex life, and all kinds of other benefits.

She’s also shown that we’re granted seven and a half years of additional life when we reframe our mindset on aging. Remarkably, this is more additional longevity than if we stop smoking or start exercising at age 50. Where are the public service announcements (PSAs) on the health benefits of reframing aging?!?

This book is meant to be your midlife PSA: a wake-up call (appropriate from a former hotelier, right?) to the unexpected pleasures and joys of midlife. On average, we’re becoming wiser, less reactive, more generous, and happier as we get older. Our life has gained a rich patina.

I know this may sound blasphemous in our ageist society, but aging can be far more aspirational than most people realize. Instead of an era one has to endure, midlife can be a time to adore. In the pages ahead, you’ll learn why.

Your Midlife Chrysalis

So when do you hit midlife? I know it crept up on me like a lurker in a back alley.

Midlife is generally defined as the years 40 to 65. A growing number of social scientists believe midlife has grown longer recently, as many young knowledge workers feel obsolete earlier due to artificial intelligence and many of us are staying in the workplace longer by choice or necessity. The

most conclusive study ever done on midlife development in the United States (*Midlife in the United States*, or MIDUS) studied people 25 to 74 years old.

In my opinion (and that of a growing number of sociologists), in a world with more and more centenarians, midlife may last from 35 to 75. Just as adolescence is a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood, maybe part of midlife's role is to be a transitional stage between adulthood and elderhood.

I believe there are three stages of midlife. During early midlife (years 35 to 50), we tend to experience some of the challenging physical and emotional transitions—a bit like an adult puberty. We realize we are no longer young, but not yet old, and we can feel it's time to metaphorically shed our skin. The core of midlife is our 50s, when we've settled into this new era and are seeing some of the upside—which you'll read about later in this book. Later midlife, which might last from 60 to 75, is when we're young enough to still be working and living a very vital life, but old enough to see and plan for what's next: our senior years. At 63, I am just getting acquainted with this third stage, but I do know it's also when our body reminds us it doesn't want to be forgotten.

Of course, not everyone experiences these three stages on the same timeline. Midlife is less of an age than it is a feeling. And just as with any other stage of life, *your mileage may vary*.

Taffy Brodesser-Akner is someone whose mileage definitely varied. She is the author of the midlife book and TV series *Fleishman Is in Trouble* and says her midlife crisis happened earlier than most. As Taffy told NPR's *Fresh Air*, at 33, with a one-year-old baby in tow, she wasn't experiencing the wild, professional success she'd imagined for herself: the success her other classmates from film school appeared to enjoy. She says, "The start of middle age hit me like a truck."

On the other hand, my dear old dad, Steve, says his midlife lasted through his mid-70s when he started winding down his career.

Regardless of what age defines it, for many of us, life begins at 50. Before that, life is just a dress rehearsal.

Fortunately, a more life-affirming description of midlife can be found in the dictionary. Go to the Cs, and you'll find *chrysalis*, defined as "a transitional state." When a caterpillar is fully grown, it uses a button of silk to fasten its body to a twig and then forms a chrysalis. Within this protective chrysalis, the transformational magic of metamorphosis occurs.

While it's a bit dark, gooey, and solitary, it's a transition, not a crisis. And, of course, on the other side is a beautiful, winged butterfly.

If you yield to the chrysalis call, it means that the incessant accumulating (the caterpillar consuming) must come to an end. This means dropping mindsets, habits, identities, stories, and choices made when we were younger, which no longer reflect who we are or who we're meant to be. As David Bowie is reported to have said before he passed away, way too young, "Aging is an extraordinary process whereby you become the person you always should have been."

This is a rich time for introspection, a journey through stillness into freedom. We must transcend the caterpillar if our midlife calling is "to butterfly."

A caterpillar consumes. A chrysalis transforms. A butterfly pollinates. Early midlife is when much of what we accumulated dissolves, just before we're ready to transform and pollinate our wisdom to the world in our 50s and beyond.

The Midlife Unraveling

Midlife is the initiation into a time of massive transitions. A drizzle of disappointments. Parents passing away, kids leaving home, financial reckonings, changing jobs, changing spouses, hormonal wackiness, scary health diagnoses, addictive behaviors becoming unwieldy, and the stirring of a growing curiosity about the meaning of life. Author Brené Brown calls this era the "midlife unraveling."

Let's unravel this word *unravel*. My initial reaction to hearing the word was, "Geez, I don't want that to happen to me!" It sounds like something is falling apart.

The more I thought about it, though, the more the word made sense. I experienced that unraveling, as well as a large dose of anxiety, in my mid-to-late 40s. I felt that I had less time to "correct" my life than I had a decade earlier.

Between 45 and 50, I felt like a failure on so many levels. My long-term relationship was ending. My company was falling apart due to the Great Recession. My adult foster son was going to prison for a crime he was wrongfully accused of committing.

It was also a time when I came face-to-face with mortality. I was losing friends and my health was failing. My life was one big unraveling.

“Slightly wounded and tightly wound” was how I described myself to a longtime friend just a couple of weeks before I had my NDE (Near Death Experience) at age 47. My self-esteem was so raveled up and tangled with the way others perceived me that I felt like the hunchback of San Francisco, and not just in my physical body.

For many, midlife can feel like a run-on sentence without any punctuation. It can be a time of deep disappointment in oneself and the world. This might be part of the reason I lost five male midlife friends—most in their 40s—to suicide, right when I was going through my own midlife challenges.

One of them, Chip Hankins, was my mirror. Not only did we share the same preppy nickname, but we were born the same year and were publicly extroverted but had an introverted, melancholy side. Our friends felt comfortable taking quiet counsel with us, and, in fact, Chip was a bit of a spiritual adviser for me.

However, though he was often helping his friends, he didn’t admit to himself that he, too, was in a dark tunnel of his own mind’s making, silently experiencing deep emotional and physical pain.

Hearing “Chip stories” at Chip’s memorial service was surreal. His friends weren’t talking about me, but I felt hyperconscious that I might be the next one to join this private club of those who checked out from life way too early.

It was then that I started telling friends about my nightmares of cancer and car crashes. I felt trapped by the momentum and monotony of my life and was looking for an escape. I was yearning for a midlife pit stop, an off-ramp from an endless freeway where I felt I was running on fumes.

Less than two months after Chip’s memorial service, I experienced a miracle disguised as a crisis, a severe allergic reaction to an antibiotic I was taking for a broken ankle and septic leg. I died multiple times onstage just after giving a speech in St. Louis.

My NDE helped me to see how silently unmoored I was from what brought me joy, which was psychologically awkward for a guy who’d started a company named Joie de Vivre (joy of life). My wise, thoughtful friend Bruce Feiler calls the wreck of my world a “lifequake.” (Excuse my French, but I called it a clusterfuck. Sorry for swearing, Mom!)

But after experiencing the dark side of early midlife, I found myself in the light around age 50. Within two years of my NDE, I’d sold my company at the bottom of the market, ended my problematic romantic

partnership, gotten my foster son exonerated and freed from prison, and realized that my own suicidal ideation was based on the prison of my own constricting identities. And while it wasn't easy, I was able to move on from a career that had defined my identity for two dozen years: being founder and CEO of my boutique hotel company.

With newfound time affluence, I hung out in my backyard hammock listening to Rickie Lee Jones and studying a series of topics that had always fascinated me: the nature of emotions, the growing popularity of festivals, the geophysics that create hot springs.

I got in the best shape of my life, partly because I was in dating mode again. But I also started wondering whether I was irrelevant in the working world. In the film *The Intern*, Robert De Niro says, "Musicians don't retire. They stop when there's no more music in them." I knew I had some "music" to share, but I wasn't sure with whom to share it.

It was around that time, at 52, that I got a call from the cofounder and CEO of a fledgling, fast-growing tech start-up named Airbnb. Brian Chesky asked me if I wanted to help him and his cofounders "democratize hospitality." I initially thought home sharing was a terrible idea. Boy, was I wrong! I wasn't the only hotelier who didn't see this Millennial disruptor sneaking up on us.

I decided to come on board as Brian's in-house mentor and a senior leader, and more than seven years later, Airbnb had grown into the world's most valuable hospitality company, and I was crowned its "modern elder" because they said I was as curious as I was wise. Thank you very much, but less than a decade earlier I'd felt like a "modern failure."

After my challenging transition into midlife in my 40s, I found my 50s to be a revelation. A time when I developed into the man I was always meant to be. It wasn't a perfect decade, but it was a time when I joyfully shed so many of my identities that were no longer serving me. I felt like I was being birthed into a second adulthood.

It was also when my curiosity once again led me to the newest topic I wanted to explore: one of the three life stages that was born in the twentieth century. But, unlike the other two—adolescence and retirement—midlife felt unloved and unstudied. And, when it was studied, it was mostly men studying men. Midlife was a life stage constrained with a bad brand—"midlife crisis"—a term that had been around almost as many years as I had.

Brené says,

The midlife unraveling is a series of painful nudges strung together by low-grade anxiety and depression, quiet desperation, and an insidious loss of control.... It's enough to make you crazy, but seldom enough for people on the outside to validate the struggle or offer you help and respite. It's the dangerous kind of suffering—the kind that allows you to pretend that everything is OK.

This is part of the reason I kept so much of my life dissatisfaction to myself. I didn't want to sound whiny and ungrateful. A “midlife crisis” seems so damn self-indulgent, right? Hence, I often suffered alone, despite the fact that so many of us—not just a privileged few—experience what I did. Silence no more! What we're going through is normal.

I often wonder about my five friends who didn't realize that early midlife, like adolescence, is just a bridge over troubled waters. But you don't have to die and come back to life, as I did, to realize that this bridge leads to a safe shore.

Yes, your midlife unraveling can be tricky, and it requires a healthy dose of support and love from those around you. But it also offers you the first glimpses of a life less ordinary.

Seeking Your Midlife Atrium

We're living longer than ever before. Some people think this means we're going to be old longer. Anthropologist and author Mary Catherine Bateson says we're thinking about this all wrong. Our extra longevity means we're not old longer but in midlife longer. Middle age has expanded, just like our waistline. She suggests that we're not adding a metaphorical extension to our home in the form of a couple extra bedrooms in the backyard of life. We need to introduce what she calls a “midlife atrium” to support our longer lives.

Creating a midlife atrium means changing the blueprint for the whole home, or the rest of our life. This suggests we're moving the walls and, in the center of our life, creating an atrium filled with fresh air and sunlight. In a world in which some estimate that half of all children born into the developed world today will live till one hundred, it's time to re-architect our societal life blueprint by creating space for people to reflect on how to consciously curate the second half of adult life.

More than a century ago, psychologist Carl Jung asked, “Are there

perhaps colleges for forty-year-olds which prepare them for their coming life and its demands as the ordinary colleges introduce our young people to a knowledge of the world?” In other words, where might we find that light-filled atrium? And are we in need of a midwife for midlife epiphanies that might emerge from this atrium?

In some ways, the sheer volume of middle-aged employees who took a break from working full-time during the COVID pandemic suggests that a collective midlife atrium is dawning. Millions of midlifers left their jobs and the cubicles that confined them and “went atrium”!

And more and more people are seeking this kind of reflection space in the company of others. Peer-to-peer midlife professional networks like Chief (for women) and Vistage are seeing huge increases in their membership. Midlife transition programs affiliated with universities, such as Stanford (Distinguished Careers Institute), Harvard (Advanced Leadership Initiative), and Notre Dame (Inspired Leadership Initiative) have grown steadily under the loose network of the Nexel Collaborative.

A version of SoulCycle, F3, pushes midlife men physically but also allows them to bond emotionally and spiritually. And even intentional communities—a communal vestige of the hippy-dippy '60s and '70s—are making a mainstream comeback focused on midlifers who are more interested in the belonging that comes from “we-tirement” than the isolation that often comes from retirement. Midlife atriums abound!

Over the past few years, I’ve had the great fortune of closely working with thousands of midlifers ranging in age from 28 to 88 (the average age being 54) who came to the Modern Elder Academy (MEA) to reimagine and repurpose themselves: to create a life that’s as deep and meaningful as it is long.

MEA has three physical campuses—one beachfront in Baja California Sur (Mexico), one a gigantic, four-square-mile New Mexico regenerative community and horse ranch, and the last one (opening in 2026) a historic Santa Fe former Catholic seminary and retreat center. And our online campus offers deep, experiential immersions on purpose, transitions, and other topics relevant to midlifers.

MEA is the world’s first midlife wisdom school that is dedicated to bringing light and space into the midlife atrium through “long-life learning.” We’ve learned that wisdom is not taught—it’s shared.

To immerse ourselves in a new community of supportive middle-aged folks who are consciously curating the second half of their lives provides

an opportunity for reflection, playfulness, and growth. It's an adult summer camp, full of whimsy and wisdom. This kind of learning community—a form of encore, experiential education—will likely become more and more prevalent as people fend off the dreaded idea of retirement and reinvent themselves for the best years that lie ahead.

“There Must Be More to Life Than This”

Are you worried that you have no options, as though you've missed the last exit and have no choice but to continue pressing the pedal to the metal in a car that's running out of gas?

Life is not a one-tank journey in which you fuel up with education and relationships and a career early in life, expecting that what you've learned and experienced will provide enough energy and inspiration to last a lifetime. Life is at least a two-tank journey. To avoid getting stuck on the side of the road, we simply need to make a pit stop to refill the tank. Hopefully, this story from “down under” will inspire you.

Ang Galloway is a 53-year-old Australian who found herself at a midlife pit stop. During the first half of her life, she followed a well-worn path. School followed by university, career, marriage, kids, and divorce. It was a path that unfolded more by default than design, one that she navigated using the maps society had drawn for her rather than piloting her own direction.

During those years, Ang came to correlate servitude with success. The problem was that, after decades spent prioritizing others, she eventually forgot how to please and prioritize herself. She'd carved herself up into a thousand tiny pieces, offering a little bit to everyone, until there was nothing left.

Then the family that she had given her life to no longer required her services. One by one, they peeled off, until Ang found herself alone, inside a life she didn't recognize. A life that looked more like an empty chalk outline of what it once had been. Haunted by the ghost of the person she always dreamed she would be, she couldn't seem to shake a persistent voice that whispered, “There must be more to life than this.”

Ang had filed away her youthful ambition, but within easy reach, ready to take up where she'd left off, when the time was right. Until the day she woke up and realized that the “right time” hadn't come—or if it had, she'd missed it.

By this time she had officially vacated her old life but not yet moved into her new one. A part of her was still pining for the familiarity and security that had warmed her world for the past twenty years, and a part of her felt liberated and excited by the infinite possibilities of all the unknowns that lay ahead. Ang felt simultaneously grateful for the life she had and consumed by a yearning for more. But more of what?

She knew that the blueprint for midlife and beyond that she'd inherited did not mirror the one that she wanted for herself. And yet she could not articulate what exactly she was looking for. All she knew was that she longed to rediscover the wild heart and adventurous spirit that had been dampened by societal expectations over the course of many years.

Ang says,

As a society, it's like we've won the longevity lotto, but we just haven't figured out what to do with the winnings of a longer life. It became clear that the societal roadmap I'd been referencing in my life ran out around midlife. I was betwixt and between, at a crossroads that felt both exciting and full of possibility but also terrifying and full of the unknown.

Ang said she no longer was who she was but hadn't yet become who she might be. Chrysalis, but not yet a butterfly.

She decided to design her own atrium. "What came to pass ended up being less of a plan and more of a process," she recalls. "A process of reimagining and reawakening that fueled the realization that the more abundant life I yearned for was lying dormant inside me all along, just waiting to be rediscovered and set free."

Time can be a dictator, but it can also be a liberator. Ang made the space to acknowledge and celebrate her transition from adulthood to elderhood in the form of a Golden Gap Year. It was, she says, "an opportunity to step into the unknown, full of curiosity and wonder, and reimagine what life could look like." Thus began her pilgrimage from Sydney to a rural beach town in Mexico to join a weeklong MEA workshop with a cohort of like-minded midlifers.

While midlife might feel like a solitary journey, it is often within a safe, social container that we can make space for new ways of being and knowing.

How can you find a safe crucible for life-changing conversations? A

quotation often attributed to Albert Schweitzer says, “In everyone’s life, at some time, our inner fire goes out. It is then burst into flame by an encounter with another human being. We should all be thankful for those people who rekindle the inner spirit.” You don’t have to do this alone.

How Am I Getting Happier as I Get Older?

Our societal and personal narratives of aging are at odds.

The societal message is that midlife represents the start of a long, slow death march full of disease, decrepitude, and desolation. But the U-curve of happiness research (which we’ll review more in [chapter 4](#)) suggests that after a dip in life satisfaction from early adulthood that hits its bottom around 45 to 50, life gets better and happier in our 50s, 60s, 70s, and for many, even into our 80s and 90s.

Maybe the secret to happiness materializes almost automatically? Folks, just have a few more birthdays! That’s not all that difficult, right?

In my daily blog, *Wisdom Well*, I list my Daring Dozen reasons why I’m getting happier as I get older. This list served as a kindling for the next twelve chapters of this book, in which I describe the physical, emotional, mental, vocational, and spiritual transformations that we experience in midlife. I hope this book will serve as a beacon to help you see the middle passage as the most transformative era of your life. Use it as your guide for learning to not only love midlife, but also to love *yourself* in midlife.

You may find that some chapters resonate with you more than others—whether it’s no longer being defined by your body ([chapter 2](#)), appreciating your relationships more deeply ([chapter 4](#)), learning how to edit your life more rigorously ([chapter 8](#)), or stepping off the career treadmill ([chapter 9](#)). It’s not essential to read them in order. Your journey through this book—as through life—is yours to define. But do spend an extra few minutes contemplating the questions in italics throughout the chapters. Think of those questions as your opportunity to experience a private personal growth workshop.

What would be on your Daring Dozen list of what gets better with age?

How are you happier and freer today than you were ten or twenty years ago?

As you’ve gotten older, you’ve learned to love brussels sprouts and classical music, so maybe it’s time to learn to love midlife as well.