

What's Unexpected in Midlife? A Second, Unpaid Job

A friend recently asked me what is the funniest, most surprising or unexpected thing about being midlife. "Midlife????!!!" I responded. "Who says I'm midlife?"

A fellow writer, a friendly Texan, who was creating an online community for women of the mid-life variety, was looking for an entertaining, preferably humorous, but brief quotation about mid-life to post alongside my picture on her website, but my mind went blank. Then it went in a million directions.

I had yet to find anything funny about being middle-aged. In fact, I was taking it pretty seriously now that I was waiting for menopause to begin and work life to end.

When it came to my personal life, I'd always made a few assumptions. I expected my mother's mannerisms and maxims to creep into my life, for my vision to change, for the aches to arrive, for the sagging and bagging of skin and body parts. And when my face plumped, then subsequently fell, I wasn't surprised as much as disappointed.

My hair colour is also a disappointment. It isn't turning grey fast enough and still needs expensive monthly sessions of tinfoil and chemicals to add blond highlights.

Without a humorous view of midlife, or interesting observations to offer, I emailed a benign response and continued to think about the question.

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What I hadn't said to my writerly friend was the continued displeasure in my professional life was indeed unexpected, surprising, and comical only in the unreasonable length of time it was taking for me to make a career change.

When it came to my professional life, I expected to have some sort of commercial success by mid-life. Sure, I'd moved up the corporate ladder one or two steps early on, when I switched from managerial and administrative work to writing magazine and newspaper articles, victory was at a standstill. I spent my 30s and early 40s trying to learn the art and craft of creative and professional writing only to end up earning a living as a technical writer. I'd given up one corporate career for an equally unsatisfying one.

Don't get me wrong. I understood the concept of "paying dues" even as I came to this new profession later in life. This wasn't just aspiration, or a creative outlet. This

was a strategic career move, but it was one that seemed to be taking a long time.

It had taken me more than a decade to come out of the creative writer's closet, and when I did, I came out swinging. I took writing courses and attended seminars; I hired editors for feedback on poems, articles, and short stories. I joined mentorship programs. I wrote a couple of screenplays. I was still finding my way (while collecting college credits), but began publishing my work. I published poetry in micro-press publications, I self-published a book, I snagged a cover story for a national arts magazine; I collected print and online publication credits. I wrote weeknights, weekends, and during holidays. I wrote in the free time between corporate writing contracts.

I paid close attention to my personal creative writing projects and tried my hand at freelance writing gigs. My parents taught me that hard work pays off, but as I wrote to the exclusion of almost everything else in my life, I was still waiting. Do what you love and the money will come. I became weary from waiting.

Where the hell was my big break?!!

Failure at 25 is simply a concept; at 35 it keeps you running for the prize because you understand that failure is possible (if not imminent). But failure at 45 is demoralizing.

In pondering a better answer to my writerly friend's mid-life question, I came to terms with my side career and began to accept that my creative writing projects would remain in the margins of my life. Something unexpected happened. The consistent pain in my hip and lower back resulting from the car accident months earlier, according to x-rays, had jolted my hip into revealing its osteo-arthritis. The prognosis? A walking cane and lifetime supply of Advil.

With the possibility of living with debilitating, chronic pain, compounded by hours at a desk doing work I don't enjoy, I decided that there was value in having my second, part-time job, in having worked at unpaid blogging and contributing to low-paying regional publications, in giving away articles to community newspapers. There was value, too, in having shared my fiction and poetry in the warm and welcoming confines of the writing community. While I now understand that it is possible I may never make the jump to full-time writer, it is still incredibly satisfying and as it turns out, it is difficult to give up. And that's one thing I hadn't expected.

—Valerie Poulin

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