

A Midlife Memoir *of Resilience, Rediscovery, and Getting It Right*



Seize Your Second Chance

Daniel P. Reilly

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Preface

Why I Wrote This Book

Pain is a spiritual wake-up call showing you that there are oceans you have not yet explored. Step beyond the world you know. Reach for heights that you never thought possible. Go to places you have deemed off limits. This is the time to take off the shell of your past and step into the rich possibilities of your future. God does not give us dreams that we cannot fulfill. If you want to do something great with your life—whether it's to fall madly in love, become a teacher, be a great parent—if you aspire to do something beyond what you are doing now, this is the time to begin. Trust yourself.

— Debbie Ford

This book is for anyone who reaches midlife feeling like they have missed their chance. It is for anyone feeling stuck, defeated, or overwhelmed by demands and responsibilities they can't remember choosing; anyone feeling alone or struggling with regrets about the past and anxiety about the future; anyone facing a health crisis or existential fears; anyone in pain who is looking back and wondering what happened to their hopes and dreams.

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Arriving at midlife can catch us by surprise. Almost overnight, we can begin to feel like our best years are behind us, like opportunities are getting scarcer, like the weight of the world is on our backs and we're on a runaway horse, holding on to the reins for dear life.

Things happen that you never see coming. No wonder midlife is associated with crisis.

But "crisis" is only part of the picture; it's the storm that clears the way for change. Middle age is meant to be transformative. We've arrived at the crossroads of past and future, in the space between the known and unknown. At last, we are at a point in our lives where wisdom and experience converge, giving us a chance to reassess and redesign our lives from a renewed and refreshed perspective. We're older, yes, but we're also wiser, seasoned, and poised to become our best possible selves. Middle age is the time to harness our second wind, seize opportunities, and achieve remarkable things because our best days are ahead of us. So don't be fooled by how things may seem in the moment, because life has a way of teaching us lessons—lessons we didn't sign up for but lessons we need.

Midlife is the equivalent of the second act in story structure. At the end of the second act, the hero (or heroine) suffers apparent defeat. There's a third act coming, with an opportunity for triumph and redemption, but in that moment, all seems lost. It's the same in life. By midlife we may have become so resigned to our apparent fate that we can't imagine what our next act could be. We don't see the potential for rediscovery and reinvention that midlife actually brings.

That's what happened to me.

Before the events I write about in this book, I was, like many of us, bearing heavy responsibilities, feeling stressed and anxious, and treating my wellness like a distant acquaintance. I was consumed by the responsibilities of life: family, work, paying the bills. Life was a never-ending race to get ahead, achieve success, or at least stay afloat. Outwardly, I maintained appearances of having it all together, but inside, I felt a growing sense of

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hopelessness. Little by little, I resigned myself to the passenger seat in my own life as if I had fallen asleep at the wheel.

I believe there is an incandescent light within each of us, but over the years, mine had begun to flicker until it was almost out. And then it got worse—much worse.

First, I was threatened at gunpoint at the bank where I was employed. It was sheer terror to be on the lethal side of that gun, but that was just the beginning of a cascade of existential threats that arrived in rapid succession: A raging wildfire drove us from our home, then a health scare sent me to the emergency room twice. Each time, I didn't know if I'd survive. Coming face to face with my mortality—not just once, but three times—rocked me to my core. “What does all this mean?” I asked. “What do I do now?”

I couldn't ignore it any longer; I was in a full-blown crisis. I knew I had to regain control of my life, but I was stuck, frozen in place. I needed help, but I didn't know how to ask. I thought seeking support was a sign of weakness. Then life intervened again. It put the right people in my life. Only because of them did I begin to take some steps to restore my health and well-being. Through them, I began to understand that asking for help or even just talking things out with someone close can make a huge difference. Gradually, I found myself looking forward to the future again. But then, just as I'd begun to feel a newfound excitement about what lay ahead, another devastating blow: I was diagnosed with a rare, life-threatening cancer.

In my darkest hours, facing death yet again, I was at a crossroads, forced to choose: I could either give up or wake up. Either accept defeat or somehow find a way to use this experience to change my life for the better, to become the person I'd always wanted to be, no matter how much time I had left.

First and foremost in my mind were my children. What kind of legacy did I want to leave them? Because of them, I persisted until I began to see the deeper truth of my situation. It may have been wrapped in harsh

circumstances, but life was offering me a second chance—a chance to re-write my story—and I took it.

The process I went through was deeply transformative, and it wasn't easy. It required me to take stock and come to terms with things I'd been avoiding all my life: my adversities, my vulnerabilities and fears, my mistakes and failures, my grief and lost dreams. Walking this path took courage and a kind of determination I didn't think I had, but here's the thing: *Facing death, facing myself, sprang me back into life.*

Spring into Life

I have a fresh new outlook on life now. I have more insight and a clearer understanding into who I am. I still feel pain and loss, but I weave that into the new person I've become. While I am still very much a work in progress, still learning to navigate life's tempests, there is no doubt that the experiences I recount here have changed me for the better—because I chose to harness them.

This is why I can say that these wake-up calls turned out to be the best things that ever happened to me. In those moments, I needed to have faith that I could find a way through them.

I tapped into something deep within, and from that place sprang a new sense of purpose for my own life. This is why I love the metaphor of spring. Spring is the season when life again rouses after the long winter and new, tender shoots sprout up out of the once dormant soil. Spring and second chances are beautifully intertwined in both nature and people. Spring spells the end of the winter's frost and the grand revival of life, symbolizing fresh starts and new opportunities. Spring is a time for new growth. The arrival of spring brings a sense of hope and optimism, much like the sense of promise and potential that second chances offer.

Midlife can be our second spring.

And then there are freshwater springs. A spring arises when a deep underground water channel becomes so full that it bubbles up to the surface

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and overflows onto the land. A spring is a kind of miracle, an expression of life's irrepressibility. This, too, describes my experience. As I began to heal, I began to feel so alive, so full of gratitude for life and all the support I had been given, that I needed to burst forth and find a way to give back that makes a difference in the lives of others.

Metaphorically, we call something a wellspring when it provides resources on a continuous basis. I hope this book can be a wellspring of insights and resources for you.

Remember: Midlife is meant to be a time of transformation.

Reaching midlife is a good reminder: Life may be short, but we're not dead yet! If you've made it this far, you've likely faced your share of brutal challenges. Maybe you've been so afraid or discouraged that you felt like giving up and running away. But if, despite it all, you still desire to live your best life, then this book is for you. Recognize that you are a brave badass who embodies the resilience, courage, and true grit of an ancient Greek warrior and the strength, steadfastness, and sage of a saint. So, never give up. We do not know what we're made of or how strong we are capable of being until adversity strikes. I did not fully understand this until I had some close calls with death when I was in my late 40s that truly frightened me. That is when I began to consider another possibility: Maybe everything was as it needed to be. Maybe looking down the barrel of a gun, fleeing a fire, and confronting a deadly disease saved my life. Maybe going through these things—while terrifying—was exactly what I needed to teach me the very lessons I needed to learn. Those experiences made me realize how valuable every moment is. These pivotal moments helped to transform my character and understanding of life. Everything important I learned came from confronting my adversities. My vulnerabilities became my superpower.

I believe that it is possible to harness that superpower and turn it into a set of tools to help deal with life's toughest setbacks and challenges, leading to an extraordinary life from our early 40s to our early 60s and beyond. What do I mean by 'extraordinary'? I mean living a life to the absolute

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fullest, a life that makes you feel thrilled to be alive, and a life without harboring past regrets. A life where you face your fears and embrace every moment, explore your true self, see the simple things in life that matter most, forgive yourself and others, continuously learn from all that life has to teach you, and strive to be your best self each day, no matter your age. You're living an amazing life when you can embrace love for others and yourself unabashedly; when you take care of yourself and the environment we live in, offer support to those in need, and reach out to those in crisis; and when you contribute your gifts and talents to the world we all share in your own unique and wonderful way, making life not only meaningful but also extraordinary, with a conviction that one person can make a difference. I truly believe that each of us has the potential to achieve remarkable things. It is not about what we can acquire from this world; it is about what we can give back and the contributions we leave behind.

And most of all, you are living an extraordinary life when you lean into crises and challenges, when you find a way to use them to fuel your growth. Take it from me, when you do you'll, rise anew, stronger, and more capable than ever before.

So, may my journey encourage and inspire you to make your life extraordinary. You will be amazed by what you are capable of.

It's not too late. You're right on time.

How This Book Is Organized

Part I, "Wake Up, Wake Up, Wake Up," recounts the stories of my three initial wake-up calls. I tell how they unfolded and how I resisted.

At last, with the help and support of others, I began the journey back into life. I started with my physical well-being but soon learned that wasn't enough. If I wanted to truly live, I needed to embark upon an inner journey, so I went to therapy. When my therapist encouraged me to keep a journal, I discovered the power of writing to heal. This inner journey is what I describe in part II, "The Ink of Introspection."

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As I wrote and processed, I felt more awake and alive. Then, like a sucker punch to the chest, came a new crisis. When I learned I had a rare cancer, another, even deeper, part of the journey began. Part III, “The Interruption,” tells this story.

In part IV, “Gifts of the Journey: Five Core Practices,” I share the most important lessons this journey taught me. This section was inspired by my kids. When I thought my life might be cut short, my greatest concern was for my children. What if I couldn’t be there for them when they needed me most? What could I leave behind to help them navigate through life’s inevitable storms? I resolved to learn whatever this journey had to teach me in the hopes of passing that wisdom on to them. That resolution became my guiding light.

The project my resolution inspired, which began humbly as a love letter to my kids, evolved into this book. I hope it will encourage and inspire you to seize every moment and live your best life.

Prologue

Strong Winds

When I first heard the news, I thought to myself, *How cool is that? This will be fun!*

I could barely stay awake, barely take in my surroundings, but I knew that my wife was sitting next to me. I took comfort in that.

After knowing each other for more than 11 years, Jasmine and I had recently married. This was the second marriage for both of us. Every day since we had met, I had had the same thought: *I am so grateful to have found her.* We were such a great couple, such perfect partners, and best friends. We were the best part of each other's lives. Together, we had faced so much, and through it all, we had built a strong and loving foundation. We were still the couple that danced in the kitchen while cooking dinner together even if there was no music playing. Who cared if we were dancing like Elaine from *Seinfeld*? Those simple and spontaneous moments not only showcased the love and connection we had for each other, but they expressed the pure joy we felt in just being together.

After a little while, they released me. Jasmine drove us home, me in the passenger seat, staring out at the passing scenery without registering what I was seeing. I was still partially sedated and not really understanding

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the weight of the news I'd just received. When we arrived home, I plopped myself on the couch and tried to make some sense of the situation. *Why*, I wondered, *is Jasmine walking around the house all teary-eyed?* What did all this mean?

I decided to call my father.

I caught him in the midst of a task. He was helping his brother (my uncle and godfather) move to an assisted living facility from the home he'd lived in for nearly 40 years. The house had to be cleared out in preparation to sell, and that day, my father was carrying out the last of the boxes.

As I told him the news, he began to weep. I, on the other hand, found myself laughing uncontrollably. "Yeah, Dad, I know, but it adds a whole new chapter to my book, right?"

Only later did he describe the scene, and it will be forever vivid in my mind: my father sitting alone on a metal folding chair in the middle of a living room with wood paneling and fire-engine-red shag carpeting, sobbing quietly as the past echoed through the mostly empty house on Revere Road in North Brunswick, New Jersey.

Meanwhile, on the other end of the line, I was overcome with hilarity. It was my only response to the overwhelming rush of emotions I was beginning to experience all at once. Part of me was trying to imagine how I was going to cope with whatever pain was in my future. Another part of my brain was thinking, *Wow, is this true? Is this really happening to me?* Looking back now, maybe that laugh was really my subconscious telling me, *Holy shit, I'm scared.*

Because it wasn't funny.

When I awoke the next day, the anesthesia had finally worn off. That's when reality began to set in. That's when I planned my funeral.

Part I

Wake Up, Wake Up, Wake Up

The only person you are destined to become is the person you decide to be.

– Nike

We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.

– Attributed to Plato

