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When Life is No Longer an Endless Upward Slope
Ways to address a midlife crisis with greater serenity, or at least consolation.
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In 1965, psychoanalyst Elliott Jaques coined the phrase “mid-life crisis.” That same year, the main character of John Williams’ novel Stoner gave a pithy and pungent description of the concept. At age 42, with an unsatisfying marriage and a stalled career, William Stoner “could see nothing before him that he wished to enjoy and little behind him that he cared to remember.”

Since its inception in 1965, Kieran Setiya, a professor of philosophy at MIT, points out, the midlife crisis has had its ups and downs. The concept came of age in 1976, with the publication of Gail Sheehy’s Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life. By 2000, mid-life crisis had a midlife crisis. Administered to over 7,000 people aged twenty-four to seventy-four, a study conducted by the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Midlife Development revealed that relatively few middle-aged Americans were preoccupied with their mortality, lost opportunities, and failed ambitions. More recently, however, researchers have found that reports of satisfaction were U-shaped, high in young adulthood and old age, with a nadir for forty-somethings.

Source: Dreamstime
Acknowledging that no consensus about a mid-life crisis has emerged, Setiya, who has just turned forty, takes the U-shape theory as his given. In Midlife, he draws on “tragic and philosophical content” (in Aristotle, Arthur Schopenhauer, John Stuart Mill, and Virginia Woolf) in a self-help book that aims to provide his readers with greater serenity, or at least consolation. Although Setiya provides no clear and compelling solutions to midlife crises, his book does help us sort through some of the apprehensions and angst of adulthood.

Some of Setiya’s recommendations are familiar, and, alas, easier said than done. He cautions against excessive self-involvement, invoking the paradox of egoism: “the pursuit of happiness interferes with its own achievement.” And he advises us to make room in our jobs, relationships, and spare time for “activities with existential value,” a grandiose phrase for pursuits – ranging from philosophy to telling funny stories – that are not “ameliorative,” i.e. that do not meet demands to pay bills, put out fires at work, to repair a relationship.

Telic activity, behavior that aims at a conclusion, is, of course, essential to striving, success, and a sound sense of self. But atelic activity, whose fulfillment lies in the moment (taking a walk, spending time with friends, parenting), can free us “from the tyranny of projects that plateaus around midlife” and provide substantive meaning to our lives. To induce a better balance between telic and atelic activities (and attitudes), Setiya recommends mindfulness and meditation.

Less familiar, perhaps, is Setiya’s suggestion that while we may have good reasons to want to change our lives, nostalgia for a time in which the future towered over the past, for options not taken, and for the indeterminacy of childhood, can be deceptive and destructive. Engaging in a “bit of cognitive therapy,” Setiya emphasizes that individuals afflicted with nostalgia should recall the uncertainty, confusion and fear of youth. The value of having options, he concludes, is too limited and too nebulous to justify discounting or discarding the “the definite ways in which a life is good.”

“For the cognitive therapist,” Setiya quips, and, I would add, for virtually all of us, “death is a killer.” Setiya does not accept the Buddhist claim that the fundamental source of suffering is a failure to absorb the metaphysics of “no self.” He sometimes lies sleepless in his bed, thinking of “the final moment, the final look, the final touch, the final taste, stunned by panic.” He has a “primitive desire” for his own persistence; he wants to endure along with people he loves. Knowing that the wish for immortality will not be granted, he writes, “is not enough to make peace with death.”

And so, Setiya leaves us with a recognition that “our therapy is partial. Its efficacy depends on why you are averse to death, what troubles you about it: the deprivation of benefits or the bare cessation of life…It may feel impossible now, but in weathering the death of a parent or friend, you can learn to let go – as you and I will one day have to let go of ourselves. If we can do it now, so much the better.”