Experience

Advice and Inspiration

MANAGING YOURSELF

FACING YOUR MID-CAREER CRISIS

Should you cope or quit?

by Kieran Setiya

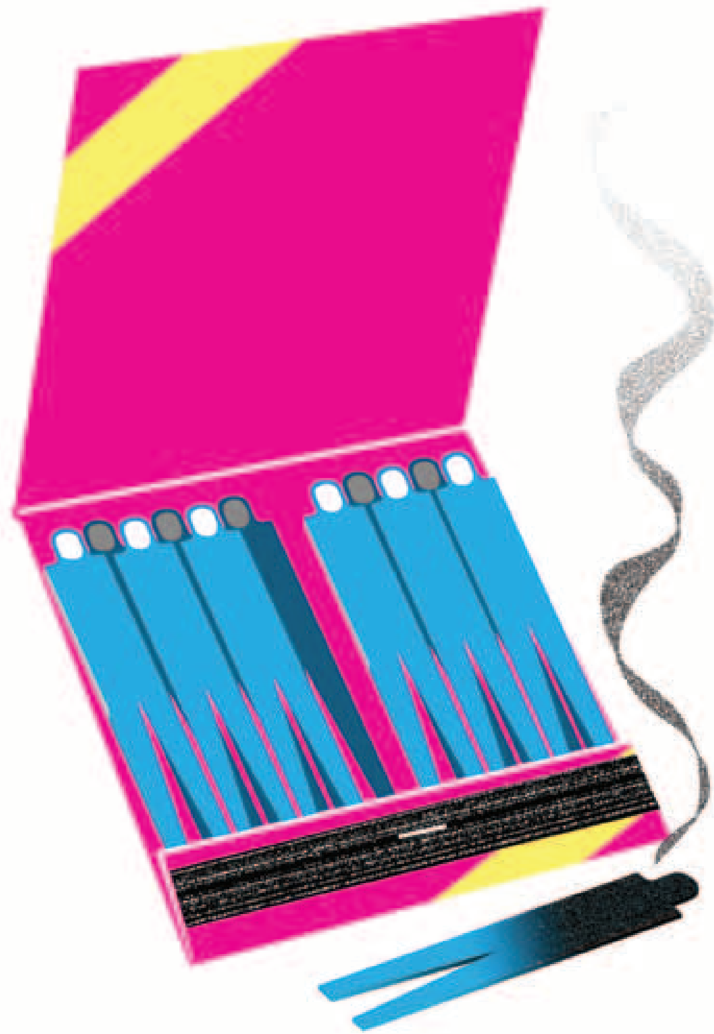
ABOUT EIGHT YEARS AGO I found myself living a cliché. A tenured philosophy professor at a respected university, I had the career of my dreams. I had made it through graduate school, the arduous climb of publish or perish, and the stress of seeking tenure and promotion. I had a wife, a child, and a mortgage. I was doing what I loved, and yet the prospect of doing more of it, week after week, year after year, began to

Illustrations by JASON SCHNEIDER

feel oppressive. I would finish the paper I was writing; I would get it published; I would write another. I would teach this crop of students; they would graduate and move on; more would come along. My career stretched before me like a tunnel. I was having a midlife crisis.

I quickly discovered that I was not alone. When I shared my plight with friends, they responded with jokes, but also with similar stories of burnout, stasis, and regret in the midst of what seemed like success. You may have heard the same from mentors or peers. You may be living this yourself. An abundance of recent research confirms that middle age is, on average, the most difficult time of life. In 2008 the economists David Blanchflower and Andrew Oswald found that self-reported life satisfaction takes the form of a gently curving U, beginning high in youth, bottoming out in our mid-40s, and then recovering as we get older. The pattern is robust around the world, affecting both men and women. And it persists when we correct for other variables, such as parenthood. The curve is gentle but significant: The average contentment gap between age 20 and about 45 is comparable to the drop in life satisfaction associated with being fired or getting a divorce.

The data on life satisfaction is consistent with earlier research specific to work. A 1996 article based on a survey of more than 5,000 British employees found that job satisfaction also took the form of a gently curving U, although the nadir came earlier, around age 39. And Elliot Jaques, the psychoanalyst who coined the phrase "midlife crisis" back in 1965, pointed not to middle-aged patients having extramarital affairs but to dramatic shifts in the creative lives of artists from Michelangelo to Gauguin, who felt unfulfilled by their previous work.



The reasons for the "mid-career crisis" are not well understood. Why does job satisfaction suffer during midlife? Judging by my own experience, and by conversations with friends, there are multiple factors: the narrowing of options, the inevitability of regret, and the tyranny of projects successively completed and replaced.

Turning to philosophy for help, I found that although they have rarely addressed midlife by name, philosophers ancient and modern offer tools for thinking through the shape of our careers and the attitudes we take toward them. These tools are therapeutic but also diagnostic. They can help you learn whether your malaise at mid-career is a sign that you need to change what you're doing or to change how you do it. Disruption can be a good thing, but it is not always feasible, and there are therapies for frustration and regret that can help you thrive even if you stay right where you are.

REGRETS ABOUT THE PAST

Some of the insights I gleaned from philosophy speak to the challenge of accepting what we cannot change. As

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life goes on, possibilities fade, options are constrained, and past decisions forge limits upon us. Even if we underestimate how much we can still do, we cannot avoid the fact that every choice results in the exclusion of alternatives. It is often in mid-career that we acknowledge the lives we'll never live and the pain of missing out.

In my case, I wanted for a while to be a doctor, like my father; then I thought of being a poet; by the time I went to college, I had picked philosophy. For the next 15 or 20 years, I didn't think much about alternatives. It is easier to get through graduate school if you don't. But at the age of 35, having jumped the hurdles of the academic racecourse, I stopped to take a breath—and realized I would never do many of the things I had wanted to. Academic employment is unusually linear and difficult to quit. Who readily gives up tenure? Realistically, I was not about to switch gears and apply to medical school or become a poet. I would later move from the University of Pittsburgh to MIT, but I would not leave academia.

Odds are, the pattern of your past career is more complex. The average 40-year-old has had a wider range of jobs. But the basic point remains. When we look back at our lives, we conjure—sometimes with relief but other times with regret—the roads not taken. Can philosophy help us come to terms with this?

I think it can. It does so by reframing the predicament of regret. Why do we feel a sense of loss about lives not lived or professions we won't pursue? We do so, even when things go well, because the values realized by different choices are not the same. Worthwhile activities are worthwhile in different ways. Take a simple example: You could see a stand-up comedian tonight or go to the first game of the World Series. Even if you know that baseball is the right decision for you, you still experience a small-scale loss: If the comedian is here for one night only, you won't get to hear her perform. Career regret is the same phenomenon writ large. You may feel no pangs when two companies offer you similar positions and you take the one with the larger salary, but it's reasonable to experience loss when you choose a career in finance over one in fashion, even if you are sure you made the right call.

What this shows is that regret need not imply that anything is wrong. Even when outcomes are rosy, regret of a certain sort is appropriate and not something you should wish away. Regret shows that you value many activities. You would still experience it if you went into fashion instead of finance, though its focus would be different. The only way to avoid regret entirely is to care about just one thing, one metric to max out. But that would impoverish your life. Remind yourself that feeling you've missed out is the inevitable consequence of something good: the capacity to find worth in many walks of life.

MISTAKES, MISFORTUNES, FAILURES

All very well, you might say, except that there is another kind of regret—the kind we experience when things do not go well. What about mistakes, misfortunes, failures? Every career has its wrong turns, and some have more than others. At midlife we find ourselves reflecting ruefully on what might have been. A friend of mine gave up a promising career in music to become a corporate lawyer. Ten years in, she found her work disappointingly drab. What haunted her was not so much wondering how to change tracks now but wishing she could change the past. Why had she made the mistake of giving up on music? How could she make peace with that?

Again, philosophy points the way. You have to distinguish what you should have done or welcomed at the time from how you should feel about it now. That the two can come apart is obvious when events don't unfold as expected. If you make a foolish investment but it happens to turn a profit, you need not regret doing something you shouldn't have. But even when there is no surprise, the feelings you should have after the fact may shift. The moral philosopher Derek Parfit imagined a teenage girl deciding to get pregnant and have a baby despite the instability of her life. It was, we may suppose, a poor decision, cutting short her education and beginning a long struggle to support the child. Years later, however, hugging her teenage son, she is grateful for him and glad she made what was, objectively, a mistake. Attachment to those you love can make it rational to affirm the past events—even inauspicious ones—on which their lives depend.

When my friend mourned her lost career in music, I reminded her that she would not have met her husband, and her daughter would not exist, if she hadn't gone to law school when she did. Love is a counterweight to regret. So is the fulfillment we glean from friendships, projects, and the activities we pursue. As the philosopher Robert Adams wrote, "If our lives are good, we have...reason to be glad we have had them rather than lives that would have been even better but too thoroughly different."

We live in details, not abstractions. Against the nebulous fact that you might have had a more successful career, you can place the concrete ways in which your actual career is good. As well as attachment to people, there is attachment to particulars—the interactions and achievements you would not have experienced in another life. When I think I should have been a physician, not a philosopher, and begin to regret my choice, I am ignoring the texture of my work and the countless ways in which the value of what I am doing is made vivid to me as I do it—in a student's progress, say, or in fruitful conversation with a colleague. It is the specifics that count against the grand cartoon of lives unlived.

This way of reconceiving your career has limits. There is no guarantee that every mistake can be affirmed in retrospect or that regret is always out of place. But regret that turns on the tendency to survey your life as if you were outside it can be muted by immersive attention to the people, relationships, and activities you hold dear and that depend on the career you chose.

ENNUI IN THE PRESENT

Accepting what we cannot change is only part of the problem we confront as we tumble down the U curve. For me, the deepest source of malaise at mid-career was not regret about the past but a sense of futility in the present. My work still seemed worthwhile: I saw value in teaching, researching, writing. Yet there was something hollow in the sequence of projects that loomed ahead. The prospect of doing one thing after another until I finally retired felt somehow self-defeating.

How can doing what is worthwhile seem empty? A first explanation turns on the notion of *ameliorative* value—the value of solving a problem or answering a need, even when the need is one you'd rather not confront. A lot of work is like this. You have to mediate conflicts between colleagues, deal with unexpected glitches in the rollout of a product, ensure that you comply with regulations. Although it is necessary, amelioration brings limited satisfaction. If the best we can do is fix mistakes, meet targets, or prevent things from going wrong, we have no vision of what is positively good. Why bother to work so hard?

One reason for a mid-career crisis is that too much of your time at work is spent putting out fires and avoiding bad results, instead of pursuing projects with *existential* value—the kind that makes life worth living. The solution is to make time for feel-good activities either in the office—for instance, by starting a pet project you've been putting off for years—or outside it, by reviving a favorite hobby or taking up a new one. This advice may seem mundane, but it has depth. Salsa dancing and stamp collecting are probably less critical than your job, but existential activities have value that ameliorative ones do not. You have to make room for such pleasures in your life.

There is a second explanation for the sense of emptiness at mid-career, which goes beyond the need for existential worth. When we look philosophically at the nature of projects and our investment in them—whether they are papers to grade, deals to broker, or products to design—we can discern a structural flaw. Projects aim at their own completion. When I focus on writing this essay, for instance, I focus on a goal that I have not yet achieved, which will be a memory the moment I am done. Satisfaction is always in the future or the past; no wonder the present feels empty. What is worse, if a project has meaning for you, not only is your fulfillment deferred, but engagement in the project destroys its meaning. In pursuing a project, you either fail—not good—or succeed and thereby terminate its power to guide your life.

One form of mid-career crisis turns on excessive investment in projects, prizing the next achievement and the next. But there is another way to be. Mindfulness is much in vogue these days, and you may roll your eyes at the mantra of "living in the present." I am not unsympathetic. When the slogan is detached from Buddhist ideas about the nonexistence of the self, it isn't obvious what remains. But living in the present has a clear, nonmetaphysical interpretation.

The key is to distinguish two kinds of activity in which we engage. Projects are *telic* activities, in that they aim at terminal states, not yet achieved. (The term comes from the Greek word *telos,* meaning "end" or "goal.") These activities aim at their own annihilation. You're preparing that client pitch and then presenting it; negotiating that deal and then closing it; planning the conference and then hosting it. Reaching the goal brings a moment of satisfaction, but after that, it's on to the next project.

Other activities are *atelic,* without a built-in end. Think of the difference between walking home and going for a stroll, or between putting the kids to bed and parenting. When you engage in atelic activities, you do not exhaust them. Nor do they evoke the emptiness of projects, for which fulfillment is always in the future or the past. Atelic activities are fully realized in the present.

At work we engage in both telic and atelic activities. You are, for example, writing an HR report (telic) and taking feedback from colleagues (atelic). Most telic work activities have meaningful atelic aspects: When you're working on that deal, you're furthering your company's growth strategy; when you're hosting that conference, you're engaging industry stakeholders. So you have a choice. You can focus on either the fixed activity or the ongoing one—the project or the process. By adjusting your orientation to become less project-driven, you can defeat the sense of emptiness in the present, without changing what you do or how efficiently you do it.

THIS BRINGS US back to the question of diagnosis. When is mid-career malaise a signal to change course, as opposed to changing how you think and feel? You may be unsatisfied professionally because your job is not a good fit for your talents, because your interests have shifted, or because the prospects for promotion are poor. But your dissatisfaction may also turn on problems of regret, or the self-subversion of projects, that finding a new job would not address. Working through the strategies I have explored is a step toward determining which is the case. Are these strategies enough to reconcile you to the limitations of your career? If not, that is an argument for switching tracks. Midlife is not too late: The mid-career crisis can be a spur to radical, vitalizing change.

But even if you make that swerve, you shouldn't forget the tactics that got me through my own malaise and revived my enjoyment of work. Recognize that missing out is unavoidable and don't try to wish it away. Understand that attachment is a counterweight to regret. Make room for activities with existential worth. And value the process, not just the project or the product.

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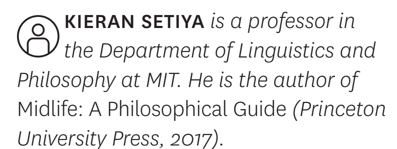

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