

REINVENTION

The reason you got to this place—broken, burned out, defeated—is because something in your life no longer worked for you. Your startup idea was not good enough. You made irrecoverable leadership mistakes. You were miserable with a spouse you probably never should have married to begin with. Your book manuscript was unsalvageable, no matter how many months you spent polishing. Your impostor syndrome made every single day of your PhD experience a torment, and you realized in the end that you didn't even like the work. You hated your job but were afraid to move on.

And now, here you are.

Whatever went so badly in your life, it is over now.

You are free from all that weight of expectation, whether imposed by you or others.

The sense of relief can be indescribable.

You feel a sense of *lightness*.

Of possibility.

Of being someone new.

“From childhood to old age, there is hardly a moment when one is not confronted by scripted life,” Gabriel Rockhill writes.³⁷ Family and society bombard us with messages about who we should be, the roles we should play, and the principles we should

embody. These scripts are often invisible, insidious, and so deeply internalized that we cannot even see them.

When failure strikes, we realize the old script never completely worked for us. Despite our best efforts to play the part, something was amiss. We denied it or concealed it, but now the incontrovertible evidence lies before us.

James Hollis, a Jungian therapist, teaches that anxiety and discontent are not mere pathologies; they are cries from deep within our subconscious, pleading with us to pay attention to something out of balance within the soul.

Failure forces us to acknowledge that who we are, and what we want out of life, is different than we once thought. Diana Glouberman writes that when our heart and soul go out of something, we need to “stop, acknowledge our feelings and the outer realities, find our truth and follow it. In other words, we need to live truthfully.”³⁸

We have no more excuses. Our previous life disappeared or at least permanently changed. Our responsibilities are temporarily lessened. We have the opportunity to let something new grow.

“Cracks in the foundations of our life narratives can have the surprising effect of clearing space for unforeseeable developments,” Rockhill continues. “Like the seeds that sprout in toxic soil, or push up through slabs of oppressive concrete, re-emergence and reinvention become possible.”

Barbara Bradley Hagerty, in a book about finding purpose and joy in midlife, expresses a similar message.³⁹

Part of midlife’s challenge is to closely examine the old script—the one that family and society writes for you, the one in which you are meeting everyone else’s expectations—and see if it needs revision. The new script is tailored to your core identity—

your own talents, passions, and personality—and these should shape your goals. For some, this means a major revision, bringing in a new cast of characters and an entirely new location. For others, it means rechanneling one’s energies just a few degrees into something that gives them meaning and verve.

The aftermath of failure gives you space to become who you really are.

As we put our lives back together, it is easy to focus on the externals. We ask ourselves whether we need a career change, what hobbies we should pursue, or which friends we should spend time with.

These are all important, but reinvention goes much deeper. Reinvention is about discovering who you *are*.

Franciscan Friar Richard Rohr writes about “first-half-of-life” and “second-half-of-life” concerns.⁴⁰ David Brooks uses the metaphor of two mountains.⁴¹ For both authors, reinvention brings a fundamental transformation of values. The first mountain is about achieving personal ambitions, dreams, and goals. During their hustling years on that mountain, people fret over reputations and ego satisfaction. They strive for excellence and self-improvement in order to find happiness and fulfillment.

Then the valley happens. The failures. Lost jobs, illnesses, scandals, divorce, estrangement, the deaths of loved ones, the crises of meaning and purpose. Those in the valley find themselves suffering and adrift. They are called to a new expedition.

Not everyone accepts the invitation. In this season of crisis, some people retrench into who they were. David Brooks writes that these people “seem to get smaller and more afraid, and never recover. They get angry, resentful and tribal.”

Other people find their way out of the valley to a second

mountain—a life of spiritual richness, close relationships, generous service, and sensitivity “to the joys and pains of the world.” We know these people when we meet them. They seem almost incandescent, radiating peace and quiet joy. Laughter has left its indelible imprint in the soft lines of their faces. Life experience broke something in them, and in doing so, set them free. Their world is evergreen.

Mr. Rogers springs to mind. So does my Uncle Doug, who shared a similar temperament. He spent a successful career in the electronics industry, but if you spoke to him any time in the past thirty years, you would never know that. Instead, he would tell you about his cherished group of friends who meet every Tuesday morning. He would guide you to his porch and show you the rock garden a friend arranged for him beside the creek. He would point out every animal within sight of his tiny townhouse. He would tell you about his latest walk, the joys of cycling well into his 80s, and the latest presidential biography he had read. Tears would spring to his eyes as he spoke about gratitude.

Uncle Doug’s transformation was not merely from a hard-working professional into a pleasant retiree. Somewhere in those years, he underwent a profound personal transformation. Decades of reflection, friendship, reading, and a practiced discipline of gratitude had shaped him into a modern saint.

Reinventing yourself can be intimidating.

No one directs your life anymore. That sacred responsibility belongs to you. As childhood scripts lose their power over you, the world becomes unimaginably vast.

When I felt called beyond the safe harbor of my childhood beliefs, I panicked. I told my pastor that I felt like I was casting out to sea on a flimsy raft.

As I began to explore my freedom, the metaphor changed. My

life was not a raft; it was a sailing ship, strong and seaworthy, and I was embarking on an extraordinary voyage. I could go anywhere I wished in this vast archipelago of life. I was free to set anchor in a quiet Buddhist cove one morning, even if I had no intent to stay, then set sail to learn about 21st century neuroscience or evolutionary biology the next. I could spend weeks fishing and watching sunsets with a circle of friends on one island, then welcome students aboard to sweep them off on a tour of exotic coral reefs. I could still visit the safe harbor of my childhood beliefs whenever I wished and could furnish my ship with my favorite possessions from those familiar lands.

Sailing the ship of life is a great responsibility. There are sandbars, whirlpools, and rocky outcroppings that can smash a ship to bits. You must sail with wisdom and prudence. You must keep your ship in good repair. A good ship needs a crew, as it is dangerous to sail alone. You face many challenges when you leave harbor, yet anyone who has tasted the salty air and felt the sea spray on their face knows that the journey is worth it.

As a Christian, I loved the writings and worldview of C.S. Lewis. I once kept a personal blog titled *Into the Utter East*, which derived its name from the noble promise of Sir Reepicheep the Mouse as he sails east across Narnian seas. He tells the crew:

My own plans are made. While I can, I sail east in the Dawn Treader. When she fails me, I paddle east in my coracle. When she sinks, I shall swim east with my four paws. And when I can swim no longer, if I have not reached Aslan's country, or shot over the edge of the world into some vast cataract, I shall sink with my nose to the sunrise.⁴²

Many years later, having outgrown a script that never well suited me, this quote still means as much to me as ever. I have

sailed longer and farther than I ever dreamed possible. I have known many storms, been shipwrecked more than once, and lost many things precious to me. But I have also known glories and wonders that I would not trade for the world. The work of reinvention goes on. I sail ever onward in pursuit of goodness, truth, and beauty.

Your journey will look different from mine, but also not so different.

We will both press on into the great unknown.

Into the utter east.

EATING GLASS



*The Inner Journey
Through Failure and Renewal*

MARK D. JACOBSEN



CONTINUAL ASCENT

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