

I Just Have **1** Question

Is It O.K. If I Have My Midlife Crisis Now?



by Doug Carpenter

I realize that most guys would've gotten it out of the way a lot sooner than this, probably around the time they turned the dreaded "Big 4-0." In fact, I'm hard-pressed to think of an event *more* capable of sending even the least fragile male ego crashing into a "perfect storm" of low self-esteem.

For most of us, one playfully-sarcastic "Lordy, Lordy, Look Who's 40!" birthday card would most likely be more than enough to have us hightailing it straight to Amazon for a year's supply of Just for Men hair dye before shooting over to *AutoTrader.com* to search for a good deal on a used Lamborghini.

Add a pair of designer sunglasses and some cargo shorts and you have

the complete "Old Dude Trying to Look Cool" package. [If it seems like I'm throwing my fellow "old dudes" under the proverbial bus here, hey — if the cliché fits, you know?]

At the point back in 1992 when my *personal* middle-age meltdown should've been taking place, however, I apparently must've been too occupied with other, more pressing matters to notice. Because I somehow just never got around to melting.

And since it would be another 15 years before we'd have iPhones and digital calendar apps, I don't even want to think about what *else* may've gotten lost in the shuffle — not that staying on top of things is all that much easier today.

Even middle age itself has gotten harder to keep track of — to the point that it isn't even really in the *middle* any more, if for no other reason than that the lives it's supposedly in the middle *of* have gotten longer. [As for whether they've gotten any *better*, these days the answer to *that* question can change by the minute.]

Because if you think about it, when someone tells you that you "don't look your age," it isn't necessarily a *compliment* — at least not until you find out what age they *do* think you look. All the more reason that the power to shape how we think and feel about ourselves should never be placed in any hands other than **our own.**



Obviously there are things that only *seem* to take longer — largely, I think, because we've simply gotten tired of having to *wait* for them. The list of *those* is neither short nor pretty.

Like restaurants bringing our food to the table once we've placed our order. Or getting a real, live human being on the line to talk to after we've hacked our way through a virtual forest of computer-generated phone system prompts.

And my favorite: Hearing a politician actually *answer* the *exact question* they were *asked* — assuming they *ever* do. [You might want to keep a *book* handy so you have something to help pass the time. It could be a *long* wait.]

But even as all those things we'd much rather *didn't* take any longer keep being extended, advances in medicine have also been steadily increasing the length of time we have the privilege of *hanging around* this beautiful world — even if it *does* involve putting up with what, to be

honest, are comparatively petty annoyances.

Over the course of my seven more-enjoyed-than-annoyed decades, projected life expectancies have leapfrogged from 65.8 years in 1952 when I made my debut [...and even then probably talking *too...*] — to 75.8 years during the "distractions" of 1992 — to 79.05 years as 2022 came to a surreal, semi-post-COVID conclusion.

But regardless of whether those numbers leave you feeling hopeful or apprehensive about *your* personal longevity, none of them make *me* any less embarrassed to think that if people see me having a midlife crisis at the age of 70, they might get the crazy idea that I expect to live to be 140.

Hopefully I look smarter than that — something I could easily find out just by asking [...assuming I'm prepared for what the answer might be.] Of course, I could *just* as easily

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ask how *old* I look. But the truth is, I don't really *care*. And frankly, why *should* I?

Because if you think about it, when someone tells you that you "don't look your age," it isn't necessarily a *compliment* — at least not until you find out what age they *do* think you look. All the more reason that the power to shape how we think and feel about ourselves should never be placed in any hands other than our *own*.

Journalist, social activist and feminist icon Gloria Steinem once summed up exactly what this kind of self-definition should look and sound like, forever earning her an honored place in the annals of self-respect.

Now 88 and still awesome, the founder and publisher of *Ms.* magazine was being interviewed during a 1984 celebration of her 40th birthday. When the reporter commented that she didn't "look 40," she responded to his arguably presumptuous observation with simple, unhesitant confidence.

"*This*," she said, "is what 40 *looks* like." And, as presumptuous of *me* as it may be to add, most definitely *not* what a midlife crisis *sounds* like. But if I were to venture a guess at the sound one of those would actually make, I think what you *might* hear would be a gust of air.

But not the sound you'd hear if the wind were rushing by so much as the sound made by a person exhaling, as when — are you ready? — they're blowing out the candles on a birthday cake.

It's most likely the moment you first lay eyes on that "playfully-sarcastic" 40th birthday card that sends you tumbling down the rabbit hole of insecurity — where your friends are waiting to good-

naturally tease you about the very things that keep both *them* and *you* lying awake at night worrying.

It's at times like this that it helps to remember that — whether it's the infamous midlife variety or the kind that annoyingly seem to crop up every other Wednesday [...*curse* those "humpday" headaches!...], whenever you have a "crisis," you're not the only one "having" it. Intentionally or not, everyone you know takes the bumpy ride right along with you.

Which is why I've been thinking that we might want to consider recalibrating our attitude about how we handle things like birthdays and the crises that seem to love lurking in the nearby shadows waiting for the perfect moment to leap out and spoil the party.

For starters, we can acknowledge going in that every phase of life comes with its own unique built-in drama, effectively taking that big, honking "midlifer" we spend years dreading and breaking it down into a series of bite-sized *mini*-crises. [Almost makes them sound *appetizing* rather than *indigestion*-inducing.]

Teens virtually ooze angst over prom invitations and college applications. Twentysomethings nervously obsess about job interviews, dating profiles and how it seems like *everyone they know* just got engaged. Further downstream, thirtysomethings stress out over promotions and parenthood while fortyish folks' fears are filled with — well, I'm sure you remember.

Elsewhere in the generational 'tudechain, the 50-year-olds are worrying about turning 60, the 60-year-olds are fretting about turning 70 and the 70-year-olds are just trying not to think about *not* turning 80.

So it's against this backdrop of shared anxiety that I propose we turn our whole approach to marking the completion of another year of living inside out. First, picture the way we've traditionally celebrated birthdays virtually *forever* and what that experience actually translates into symbolically.

We challenge the happy event's

guest of honor to respirationally *extinguish* a caketop carpet of *flaming candles* [...cue the blowing air sound effect and smack whoever had the bright idea to decorate with 40, 50, 60, seriously, 70?, fully-lit candles.]

With what *result*? The room you're in is plunged into sudden and in-no-way-festive darkness. And what kind of *message* does that send? Certainly not a positive one. So how about *this* instead?

Start with a cakeful of *unlit* candles and accord the birthday boy or girl the honor of *lighting* them, one by one, acknowledging with the added glow of each new flame something they treasure about the life that you've all gathered to celebrate.

As the brightness of each newly-lit candle fills the room with more and more light and the positivity of the gratitude being shared fills the hearts of everyone present, spirits will be lifted and hope instilled. And

isn't that *just* how you'd want everyone to leave the party feeling?

And sure — with so many joys to recall and blessings to count, it might take a while to light all those candles. But having lived and survived those eventful years — with no doubt plenty of crises along the way, take your time. You've *earned* it. [Just don't go *too* slowly, though. You wouldn't want the first candle to go out before you get the last one lit.]

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Throughout *After 50's* first 16 years, veteran WNY writer and columnist Doug Carpenter regularly shared his wry generational observations with readers as *Everyboomer*. He has now returned to write a uniquely-named new monthly humor/opinion column called *I Just Have 1 Question* — which he says he'll ask and then bravely try to answer... without, he fervently hopes, looking excessively foolish in the process. [We wish him luck.]

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