

Introduction

My (Only Slightly Sad) Midlife Manifesto

How Hitting My Limits Led
to a Freeing Realization

None of the kids were going to sleep. And it had already been a long day.

I'd started work with a series of Zoom meetings at 7 a.m. and didn't close my laptop till dinnertime. My wife, Grace, spent the day homeschooling our two oldest kids while chasing our restless toddler. The toddler had invented an exciting game. She would climb up onto the table where her brother and sister were doing homework, sweep all the pencils and pens onto the ground, and tear up their papers.

"Mom!" our six-year-old howled. "She's doing it again!"

Now we were running through the nighttime routine. Feeding, bathing, dressing, brushing, coaxing, pleading, screaming (them), crying (me).

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It was a marathon.

When it was finally time for bed, we divided to conquer. Grace took the toddler; I took the big kids. I told them a story, said a quick prayer, and kissed them good night.

“Okay, guys. Time to sleep.”

Yeah, right. Thirty minutes later I could hear them squealing and jumping around. I went in and discovered that they were diving into a pile of pillows in the middle of the room. Had I been less grumpy, I might have noticed how cute they were. But I was in no mood. “GO TO SLEEP!” I thundered. Mary’s lip started to tremble. Then sobs. I ordered her brother back to the top bunk and I lay down beside her. Finally, they both nodded off.

Meanwhile, our two-year-old angel was acting more like a demon, screaming in her crib. Grace tried to rock her, but she would escape from her lap, run around the room, then rip off her diaper and hand it to Grace like a present.

When Grace finally emerged, shutting the door quietly behind her, she exhaled slowly. “These days are loooong.”

It was after 10 p.m. We’d planned to watch some TV but knew the kids would be up at the crack of dawn. “Maybe we should just go to bed,” I said.

As we lay in bed, Grace smiled grimly. “Tough day.”

“Is life this hard for everyone?” I wondered aloud.

“I don’t know,” she said. “But we’re doing it. And we’ll do it again tomorrow.”

FLASHBACK

In the early days of our marriage, life looked quite different. Shortly after our wedding we moved from Portland, Oregon, to

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Pasadena, California, where I enrolled in seminary. I'd briefly considered going to law school but settled on seminary simply because, well, I wanted to study theology. I didn't want to be a pastor (that's what my dad did) or a professor (that was too much school). I wanted to write, to communicate God's truth. But I didn't know anyone who made a living doing that. The truth is I had no clear vocational objectives. But somehow it made sense to take out a bunch of student loans and move a thousand miles away to study about God.

We sold everything that wouldn't fit into our Volkswagen Beetle and struck out for California. After living in the gray and rainy Northwest, driving into Pasadena felt like rolling into heaven. The seminary campus was idyllic, with a commons area that featured sculptures, a prayer garden, and pathways lined with palm trees. The seminary café served sandwiches named after famous theologians. On any given day you could spot Grace and me sitting cross-legged with other seminarians on the grass eating a Dietrich Bonhoeffer or a Karl Barth (they were delicious) while discussing the New Perspective on Paul or the proper relationship between art and the church. Grace, who is a painter, worked at a center that hosted lectures on art and theology. At night we attended lectures from visiting scholars, went to art galleries, or watched plays. We swam in a world of ideas.

When we talked about the future, we had big, if amorphous, plans.

"I don't want the average life. Who cares about the American Dream?" I'd say to Grace.

She was right there with me. "Let's do something . . . different."

It wasn't about being cool or original. Well, maybe a little. But most of all, we wanted to do something big for God. We were



moved by the plight of the poor and the great needs of the world. We were passionate about sharing our faith. And we made attempts to live out our values. We'd go to soup kitchens to serve meals or head down to a mission in LA's Skid Row for a karaoke night with the homeless. At one point, we got tired of piling up knowledge about God in our heads and ventured to the main strip in Pasadena, Colorado Boulevard, to hand out copies of the gospel of John and strike up spiritual conversations with strangers.

Our small attempts to change the world didn't result in much change, but we weren't discouraged. It was a foretaste of what we assumed would be an exciting and countercultural life together. Maybe it would involve going overseas or starting a nonprofit. We realized it would mean forgoing or delaying some of the milestones of a typically "successful" life, but we didn't mind. Other people can chase the white picket fence and have 2.5 children. We were going to do something radical.

SHOWING UP

It's a little embarrassing even writing those words now. Our life is great, but it has turned out differently than what we envisioned as we ate theological sandwiches beneath the palm trees in Pasadena. Today I paid the mortgage, washed our minivan, and took the family out for dinner. At Olive Garden. We don't have 2.5 children. We have three. We don't have a white picket fence, but now that I mention it, I wonder how much one would cost.

Life comes at you fast.

Maybe you can relate. You started your journey into adulthood with a bright burst of idealism—and then slammed into reality. You were going to do something dramatic and different

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only to find it's hard just to make it. As the years rolled on, your life got busier, tougher. One day you woke up with more responsibilities and less free time. Now you juggle a host of competing priorities: career, family, health, friends, church. It feels like if someone adds one more thing to your to-do list, you might crumble. At the same time, those dreams you had early on are still there, nagging faintly at the back of your mind. Or receding out on the horizon as you move toward them in slow motion.

If that's you, you're holding the right book. I wrote this book for you, and honestly, for myself too.

I haven't figured it all out, but I've discovered some things along the way.

One is that we're not called to change the world. God doesn't require us to do something big and dramatic to fulfill His call on our lives. My younger self would be disappointed to hear that. But now it's a relief. Saving the world sounds exhausting and I just don't have the energy these days. Instead, God calls us to small acts of ordinary faithfulness. This kind of success doesn't come in spite of life's responsibilities and challenges, but in the midst of them. Even because of them. It might not change the world, but it does change us and the people around us.

This hit home for me recently when Grace asked me to name the people I most admired. My list didn't contain one person who was powerful or famous. In fact, most weren't especially talented or charismatic. So why did I admire them? Because they were faithful. One was a small church pastor who kept teaching and leading despite a debilitating illness. Another started a soup kitchen. And she kept feeding the homeless, even after losing her husband.

These people didn't win my respect because they did something daring and dramatic. It was because they persevered. They



kept getting up and coming back and pushing ahead. They continued serving and loving and praying and believing. They obeyed God's call to run the race, even when the best they could do was place one wobbly leg in front of another.

They just showed up. That has become a mantra for me. A prayer. It might sound a little silly, but I repeat it to myself when I'm disappointed or discouraged.

Just show up.

In the pages ahead, you'll see the powerful truth contained in this simple, three-word phrase. I'm going to show you examples from Scripture of how God used people who showed up. And I'm going to tell contemporary stories of how He's still doing that today. We're going to look at the incredible things that happen through the power of simply being a persistent presence. I want to challenge you to show up in your life for the people around you. We're going to explore what it looks like to show up for your family, for your work, for your community, and for your friends. Most importantly, I'm going to ask you to show up for God. And I want to inspire you to keep showing up, even when you're weary or discouraged or uncertain.

A CRUCIAL COMMITMENT

Showing up is a simple commitment. But it's not a trivial one. As I started researching for this book, I got excited thinking about how my life would change if I put this principle into action. How would my marriage transform if I consistently showed up for my wife, putting her needs above my own? What would happen if I showed up for our kids? Not just physically, but if I put down my phone more often and gave them my full attention? How would

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things change if I tackled my work with passion and intentionality instead of sleepwalking through my daily to-do list? How would my life change if I showed up to commune with God every day and spent time in His Word?

What got me even more excited was thinking about the effect it would have if thousands of others began doing the same. What impact would it have on families? How would our communities change if neighbors showed up for each other? What would happen if we refused to walk past needs hoping someone else would do something about them? What if we started showing up for people who were lonely, desperate, and hurting? It would mean fewer people slipping through the cracks. More people feeling welcomed and loved. There would be less depression and alienation. Fewer suicides and incidents of violence. No abandoned children. No neglected friends. Destructive generational patterns would be interrupted. Whole communities would begin to heal.

Does that get you excited too? If it feels too abstract to imagine the large-scale impact, think smaller. How would showing up affect you? What difference would it make for your friends and family? For your relationship with God? For the work God has called you to do? In the pages ahead, I hope you catch a vision for how adopting this simple commitment could transform your life and bless the people around you.

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus tells a story about a man who prepares a great feast. Then he sends out his servant to invite his friends to the banquet. But they all decline his invitation. They make excuses. One says he's just bought a piece of land and needs to tend to it. Another sends his regrets, saying he recently purchased some livestock. A third says he can't come because he just got married.



The man is furious. He instructs his servant to go out and invite anyone who wants to come to the feast. “Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full,” he says (Luke 14:23).

Jesus uses the story to describe what the kingdom of God is like. Whole books have been written about this powerful parable, but one thing jumps out at me. The people who end up eating at the great feast only have one thing in common: they showed up. They weren’t even supposed to be there. None of them were on the guest list. They were strangers, random people off the street. Some of them probably homeless. But they did something the others were unwilling to do. When they got the call, they came.

That’s how things work in God’s economy. He provides the feast. You just show up.

Those invited guests had a lot of excuses not to show up. Good excuses. I’ll bet you have excuses too. You’re tired. Too busy. You don’t have the right credentials. You don’t feel prepared. You have too much going on. But there are people who need you. People who won’t make it without you. Most importantly, God is calling you. He’s prepared a feast. And the table is ready.