

The Real Roots of Midlife Crisis

What a growing body of research reveals about the biology of human happiness—and how to navigate the (temporary) slump in middle age
All photos by Chris Buck

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This summer, a friend called in a state of unhappy perplexity. At age 47, after years of struggling to find security in academia, he had received tenure. Instead of feeling satisfied, however, he felt trapped. He fantasized about escape. His reaction had taken him by surprise. It made no sense. Was there something wrong with him? I gave him the best answer I know. I told him about the U-curve.

Not everyone goes through the U-curve. But many people do, and I did. In my 40s, I experienced a lot of success, objectively speaking. I was in a stable and happy relationship; I was healthy; I was financially secure, with a good career and marvelous colleagues; I published a book, wrote for top outlets, won a big journalism prize. If you had described my own career to me as someone else's, or for that matter if you had offered it to me when I was just out of college, I would have said, "Wow, I want that!" Yet morning after morning (mornings were the worst), I would wake up feeling disappointed, my head buzzing with obsessive thoughts about my failures. I had accomplished too little professionally, had let life pass me by, needed some nameless kind of change or escape.

My dissatisfaction was whiny and irrational, as I well knew, so I kept it to myself. When I thought about it—which I did, a lot—I rejected the term midlife crisis, because I was holding a steady course and never in fact experienced a crisis: more like a constant drizzle of disappointment. What annoyed me most of all, much more than the disappointment itself, was that I felt ungrateful, the last thing in the world I was entitled to be. Hopeful that rationality might prevail, I would count my blessings, quite literally—making lists mentally, and sometimes also on paper of all that I had to be thankful for. Reasoning with myself might help for a little while, but then the disappointment would return. As the weeks turned into months, and then into years, my image of myself began to change. I had always thought of myself as a basically happy person, but now I seemed to be someone who dwelt on discontents, real or imaginary. I supposed I would have to reconcile myself to being a malcontent.

As I moved into my early 50s, I hit some real setbacks. Both of my parents died, one of them after suffering a terrible illness while I watched helplessly. My job disappeared when the magazine I worked for was restructured. An entrepreneurial effort—to create a new online marketplace that would match journalists who had story ideas with editors looking for them—ran into problems. My shoulders, elbows, and knees all started aching. And yet the fog of disappointment and self-censure began to lift, at first almost imperceptibly, then more distinctly. By now, at 54, I feel as if I have emerged from a passage through something. But what?

Long ago, when I was 30 and he was 66, the late Donald Richie, the greatest writer I have known, told me: "Midlife crisis begins sometime in your 40s, when you look at your life and think, Is this all? And it ends about 10 years later, when you look at your life again and think, Actually, this is pretty good." In my 50s, thinking back, his words strike me as exactly right. To no one's surprise as much as my own, I have begun to feel again the sense of adventure that I recall from my 20s and 30s. I wake up thinking about the day ahead rather than the five decades past. Gratitude has returned.

I was about 50 when I discovered the U-curve and began poking through the growing research on it. What I wish I had known in my 40s (or, even better, in my late 30s) is that happiness may be affected by age, and the hard part in middle age, whether you call it a midlife crisis or something else, is for many people a transition to something much better—something, there is reason to hope, like wisdom. I wish someone had told me what I was able to tell my worried friend: nothing was wrong with him, and he wasn't alone.

In the 1970s, an economist named Richard Easterlin, then at the University of Pennsylvania, learned of surveys gauging people's happiness in countries around the world. Intrigued, he set about amassing and

analyzing the data, in the process discovering what came to be known as the Easterlin paradox: beyond a certain point, countries don't get happier as they get richer. Today he is at the University of Southern California and is celebrated as the founder of a new branch of economics, focused on human well-being. At the time, though, looking at something as subjective as happiness seemed eccentric to mainstream economists. His findings, Easterlin says, were for many years regarded as a curiosity, more a subject for cocktail conversation than for serious research.

A generation later, in the 1990s, happiness economics resurfaced. This time a cluster of labor economists, among them David Blanchflower of Dartmouth and Andrew Oswald of the University of Warwick, got interested in the relationship between work and happiness. That led them to international surveys of life satisfaction and the discovery, quite unexpected, of a recurrent pattern in countries around the world. "Whatever sets of data you looked at," Blanchflower told me in a recent interview, "you got the same things": life satisfaction would decline with age for the first couple of decades of adulthood, bottom out somewhere in the 40s or early 50s, and then, until the very last years, increase with age, often (though not always) reaching a higher level than in young adulthood. The pattern came to be known as the happiness U-curve.

Meanwhile, Carol Graham, a development economist (she is now at the Brookings Institution, where I'm a senior fellow), was looking at Peruvians who had emerged rapidly from poverty. "How do these people think they've done?" she wanted to know. She told me she was startled to find that objective life circumstances did not determine subjective life satisfaction; in Peru, as in other countries, many people who had moved out of poverty felt worse off than those who had stayed poor. "I didn't know how to explain it," she said. Hunting around, she discovered the sparse literature on the economics of happiness, plunged into survey data, and found the same U-shaped pattern, first in Latin America and then in the rest of the world. "It was a statistical regularity," she said. "Something about the human condition."

The U-curve emerges in answers to survey questions that measure satisfaction with life as a whole, not mood from moment to moment. The exact shape of the curve, and the age when it bottoms out, vary by country, survey question, survey population, and method of statistical analysis. The U-curve is not ubiquitous; indeed, one would be suspicious if a single pattern turned up across an immensely variegated landscape of surveys and countries and generations and analyses. Still, the pattern turns up much too often to ignore. For example, in a 2008 study, Blanchflower and Oswald found the U-curve—with the nadir, on average, at age 46—in 55 of 80 countries where people were asked, "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?" Graham and Milena Nikolova recently looked at an international survey that asked people in 149 countries to rate their lives on a zero-to-10 scale where 10 "represents the best possible life for you" and zero the worst. They found a relationship between age and happiness in 80 countries, and in all but nine of those, satisfaction bottomed out between the ages of 39 and 57 (the average nadir was at about age 50). The apes' well-being bottomed out at ages comparable, in people, to between 45 and 50—implying that the happiness curve is not uniquely human.

The curve tends to evince itself more in wealthier countries, where people live longer and enjoy better health in old age. Sometimes it turns up directly in raw survey data—that is, people just express less overall satisfaction in middle age. But here's a wrinkle: in many cases (including the two analyses I just cited), the age-based U-curve emerges only after researchers adjust for such variables as income, marital status, employment, and so on, thus looking through to the effects of age alone. Some scholars—including Easterlin, the grand old man of the field—take a dim view of making such adjustments. Carol Ryff, a psychologist who directs the University of Wisconsin's Institute on Aging, told me, "To my mind, that's how you obscure the story; that's not how you clean it up." But filtering out important life circumstances suggests something intriguing: there may be an underlying pattern in life satisfaction that is independent of your situation. In other words, if all else is equal, it may be more difficult to feel satisfied with your life in middle age than at other times. Blanchflower and Oswald have found that, statistically speaking, going from age 20 to age 45 entails a loss of happiness equivalent to one-third the effect of involuntary unemployment.

"I view this as a first-order discovery about human beings that will outlive us by hundreds of years," Oswald told me. Not everyone is prepared to go so far. Many psychologists have their doubts, partly because the U-curve is a statistical regularity that emerges from large data sets, and psychologists prefer to study actual

people, whether individually or in experimental groups, and ideally across their whole lives. “I think it’s a mistake to generalize about life-course patterns,” Ryff told me. “In the final analysis, you’re not talking about real people when you tell these big, generic stories.” Heretofore, when psychologists have gone looking for evidence of midlife crisis—that is, of a distinctive phenomenon of middle age, rather than just stress or difficulty that might come at any point in life—they haven’t found it, and they are cool to the possibility that the smoking gun has turned up in economics, of all places.

In recent work, however, U-curve researchers have begun to find evidence that is harder to dismiss as mere statistical correlation. Oswald, Terence Cheng, and Nattavudh Powdthavee have found the U-curve in four longitudinal data sets from three countries: an important kind of evidence, because it traces the lived experiences of individuals over time, rather than comparing people of various ages in a statistical snapshot. Likewise, Blanchflower and Oswald, looking at samples from 27 European countries, have found a “strong hill-shaped pattern” in the use of antidepressants, peaking in people’s late 40s. Being middle-aged “nearly doubles” a person’s likelihood of using antidepressants. The same pattern appears, they’ve found, in the two U.S. states that collect the relevant data (New Hampshire and New Mexico).

And a lot of eyebrows went up when Oswald and four other scholars, including two primatologists, found a U-shaped curve in chimpanzees’ and orangutans’ state of mind over time. Zookeepers, researchers, and other animal caretakers filled out a questionnaire rating the well-being of their primate charges (more than 500 captive chimps and orangutans in Australia, Canada, Japan, Singapore, and the United States). The apes’ well-being bottomed out at ages comparable, in people, to between 45 and 50. “Our results,” the authors concluded in a 2012 paper, “imply that human wellbeing’s curved shape is not uniquely human and that, although it may be partly explained by aspects of human life and society, its origins may lie partly in the biology we share with closely related great apes.”

I think where the evidence points is this: being satisfied is perfectly possible in midlife, but for a great many of us it is harder. That is how the U-curve felt to me, and how it feels to some of the people I unscientifically surveyed for this article.

“I think it must be something internal,” my 45-year-old friend S. told me. He described his 20s as exciting and fun (“I was really dumb but thought I knew a lot”) and his 30s as a time of hard work and steady rewards (“I felt on track ... Things looked like white picket fences and the American dream”), but said he was bushwhacked in his 40s by an unexpected divorce, unmarried fatherhood, and a heart attack. He said he now experiences difficulty feeling contentment, leading to some of the same self-doubt that I felt: a creeping suspicion that he is fated to be whiny. He also wondered whether his dissatisfaction has been a cause of some of his problems, not just an effect. “Professionally, things looked pretty good,” S. told me. “But maybe something was going on. Something sufficient for my wife to leave. If I did a deep psychological dive, I might say that nothing will ever make me content. Maybe there’s something deeply psychologically wrong with me. I see life as a challenge to overcome rather than an adventure to be enjoyed. I’ve thought of running away to Brazil—changing my name and becoming a hotel clerk. Maybe that will change in my 50s.”

I was happy to tell him that the odds are in his favor.

My friend K. is a 54-year-old woman whose trajectory somewhat resembles S.’s. She had an exciting launch in her 20s (working “my dream job”), a sense of continuing achievement but slowing momentum in her 30s (“sort of a slog”), and an ambush in her 40s, when her father died, her mother had a stroke, her husband left her after their daughter was born, and she was laid off. Despite coping with all of that and doing well professionally, even with her layoff (“I did better in my career; I made more money”), she developed what she describes as a dark sense of humor about her life, ruefully telling herself that at least she had so many troubles that she couldn’t dwell on all of them at once.

In the past few years, things have turned upward, markedly so. K.’s 50s have brought not only less external turbulence but less on the inside, too. “On a day-to-day basis, I probably do the same things, but I feel different,” she says. Her values have shifted away from work: “I could see that was not going to be a big source of achievement. I measure my worth now by how I can help others and contribute to the community. I enjoy the

relationships that I've been able to nurture over these years—longer-term friends, growing with those friends. It was always striving and looking ahead, as opposed to being in the now and feeling grateful for the now. I think I feel a great gratitude. When I am in a situation when I can moan a little bit or feel bad about some of the difficult things that have happened, the balance sheet is hugely on the side of all the great things that have happened. And I think that gratitude has helped me be both more satisfied and more giving." She describes her 50s, so far, as good and improving.

The same has been true for me. Though I still have my share of gloomy days, I find it far easier than I did in my 40s to appreciate what I have, even without writing down lists of good things, as I had to resort to doing a decade ago. It certainly helps that my pet cause, gay marriage, has met with success, and that I myself achieved legal marriage at age 50. But something has changed inside, too, because in my 40s, I had plenty of success and none of it seemed adequate, which was why I felt so churlish. For me, after a period when gratitude seemed to have abandoned me, its return feels like a gift.

It turns out that there is good science about this gift: studies show quite strongly that people's satisfaction with their life increases, on average, from their early 50s on through their 60s and 70s and even beyond—for many until disability and final illness exact their toll toward the very end (at which point it's hard to generalize). In a 2011 study, for example, the Stanford University psychologist Laura Carstensen and seven colleagues found that "the peak of emotional life may not occur until well into the seventh decade"—a finding that is "often met with disbelief in both the general population and the research community," despite its strength. Carstensen described to me this pattern in her own life. "Forties were, for me, the worst," she said. "You're never good enough professionally. I think you're coming out of the fog in the 50s." Now, at 60, she said, "I feel so privileged. I feel it now." Elaine Wethington, a professor of human development and sociology at Cornell, whose research likewise finds that people become more satisfied and more optimistic later in life, is in her early 60s and reports her own turning point at about age 50. "I feel like I've reached a kind of flow in my work and career," she told me. No guarantees, of course, but reporting this article has led me to think that the upturn I've felt in my 50s is likely to continue. As Andrew Oswald exclaimed to me when I mentioned my own post-40s upswing: "Just wait until you're 60!"

Of course, the most interesting question, and unfortunately also the hardest question, is: Why is happiness so often U-shaped? Why the common dissatisfaction in middle age? And why the upswing afterward?

Part of the answer likely involves what researchers call selection bias: unhappier people tend to die sooner, removing themselves from the sample. Also, of course, middle age is often a stressful time, burdened with simultaneous demands from jobs, kids, and aging parents. Those explanations don't seem adequate by themselves, though. I can attest that I experienced the U-curve without dying off in the process; so do other people, as we know from happiness research that follows individuals over time. And recall that the U-curve often emerges after adjusting for other variables in life (children, income, job, marriage), so it is not purely situational.

A common hypothesis, and one that seems right to me, is alluded to by Carstensen and her colleagues in their 2011 paper: "As people age and time horizons grow shorter," they write, "people invest in what is most important, typically meaningful relationships, and derive increasingly greater satisfaction from these investments." Midlife is, for many people, a time of recalibration, when they begin to evaluate their lives less in terms of social competition and more in terms of social connectedness. In my 40s, I found I was obsessively comparing my life with other people's: scoring and judging myself, and counting up the ways in which I had fallen behind in a race. Where was my best seller? My literary masterpiece? Barack Obama was younger than I, and look where he was! In my 50s, like my friend K., I find myself more inclined to prize and enjoy people and relationships, which mercifully seem to be pushing the unwinnable status competition into the background. Also, Carstensen told me, "when the future becomes less distant, more constrained, people focus on the present, and we think that's better for emotional experience. The goals that are chronically activated in old age are ones about meaning and savoring and living for the moment." These are exactly the changes that K. and others in my own informal research sample reported.

In my own case, however, what seems most relevant is a change frequently described both in popular lore and in the research literature: for some reason, I became more accepting of my limitations. “Goals, because they’re set in temporal context, change systematically with age,” Carstensen says. “As people perceive the future as increasingly constrained, they set goals that are more realistic and easy to pursue.” For me, the expectation of scaling ever greater heights has faded, and with it my sense of disappointment and failure.

The idea that the expectations gap closes with age has recently received some empirical backing, in the form of fascinating findings by Hannes Schwandt, a young economist at Princeton University’s Center for Health and Wellbeing. He used a German longitudinal survey, with data from 1991 to 2004, that, unusually, asked people about both their current life satisfaction and their expected satisfaction five years hence. That allowed him to compare expectations with subsequent reality for the same individuals over time. To his own surprise, he found the same result regardless of respondents’ economic status, generation, and even whether they lived in western or eastern Germany (two very different cultures): younger people consistently and markedly overestimated how satisfied they would be five years later, while older people underestimated future satisfaction. So youth is a period of perpetual disappointment, and older adulthood is a period of pleasant surprise. What’s more, Schwandt found that in between those two periods, during middle age, people experienced a sort of double whammy: satisfaction with life was declining (that’s the U-curve, which manifested itself clearly), but expectations were also by then declining (in fact, they were declining even faster than satisfaction itself). In other words, middle-aged people tend to feel both disappointed and pessimistic, a recipe for misery. Eventually, however, expectations stop declining. They settle at a lower level than in youth, and reality begins exceeding them. Surprises turn predominantly positive, and life satisfaction swings upward. And the crossover, in Schwandt’s sample, happened about where you would expect: in the 50s.

“This finding,” Schwandt writes, “supports the hypothesis that the age U-shape in life satisfaction is driven by unmet aspirations that are painfully felt during midlife but beneficially abandoned and felt with less regret during old age.”

Okay, but why does this abandonment and reorientation seem to happen so reliably in midlife? Firm explanations are some years away. Still, clues have emerged from the realm of brain science, and they hint at an answer that is both heartening and ancient.

Dilip V. Jeste is a distinguished psychiatrist with an unusual pedigree. On the “distinguished” side of the ledger are his multiple professorial titles at the University of California at San Diego, his recent presidency of the American Psychiatric Association, and his record as one of the country’s most prolific geriatric psychiatrists. Awards and certifications take up an entire wall of his office and range from the American College of Psychiatrists’ Award for Research in Geriatric Psychiatry to San Diego Magazine’s “Top Doctors 2013.” On the “unusual” side is his upbringing in a small town in India (he speaks with a lilting Marathi accent), his decision to focus his medical career on helping the elderly age successfully rather than on merely treating their ailments—and his belief that wisdom is a concept that belongs not just to Aesop and Aristotle but to cutting-edge neuroscience. Jeste, who is 70 and thin enough to look frail until you notice his nimble gait, is no mystic. He and his colleagues use magnetic-scanning technology and batteries of psychological tests to peer into the brain for clues to how the mind and emotions work.

As a teenager in India, Jeste came across Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*. “It was like an Agatha Christie mystery,” he says, and it put him on the path to a degree in psychiatry and a research career in the United States, first at the National Institutes of Health and then at UCSD. Studying elderly schizophrenics, he was startled to find that they did better as they aged. That led him to explore how people can age successfully—that is, happily—despite health problems and other adverse circumstances. In 2006, and again in 2013, he published findings that people feel better, not worse, about their lives as they move through their later decades, even with the onset of chronic health problems that would lead one to expect distress or depression. “It was really a big surprise,” he says.

“The question I asked,” Jeste told me, “was, ‘Is there anything cognitive that actually improves with aging?’ That led me to think about wisdom. I started wondering whether the life satisfaction we were seeing in older people was related to their becoming wiser with age, in spite of physical disability.”

His medical colleagues were skeptical, to say the least, telling him that the study of wisdom should be left to philosophers, not neuroscientists or psychiatrists. “I took that as a challenge.” Jeste grew up in a world steeped in reverence for wisdom. “It’s cultural, growing up in India,” he said. “We read the Gita, the Hindu Bible, as it were. But the Gita really is a document about what a wise person should do.” In recent years, Western psychiatry has generated a very small but scientifically legitimate body of research literature on wisdom. Surveying both modern research and ancient texts, Jeste found that the concept of wisdom has stayed “surprisingly similar” across centuries and across geographic regions: “All across the world, we have an implicit notion of what a wise person is.” The traits of the wise tend to include compassion and empathy, good social reasoning and decision making, equanimity, tolerance of divergent values, comfort with uncertainty and ambiguity. And the whole package is more than the sum of the parts, because these traits work together to improve life not only for the wise but also for their communities. Wisdom is pro-social. (Has any society ever wanted less of it?) Humans, Jeste says, live for an unusually long time after their fertile years; perhaps wisdom provides benefits to our children or our social groups that make older people worth keeping around, from an evolutionary perspective.

“Wisdom is useful at any age,” he says. “But from an evolutionary point of view, younger people are fertile, so even if they’re not wise, they’re okay. But older people need to find some other way that they can contribute to the survival of the species.” It’s also possible, he says, that “competitiveness may be more favored in the young, and more emotional regulation, more tolerance of diversity, more insight, in older people.” In any case, the very universality of the concept of wisdom, Jeste believes, suggests some biological basis. Which is why he’s seeking wisdom’s roots in the brain. “The peak of emotional life may not occur until well into the seventh decade.”

In San Diego this summer, I watched as Jeste and Lisa Eyler, a clinical psychologist at UCSD, conducted brain-imaging experiments to learn how older people process tasks related to compassion—an element of wisdom. They greeted J., a 71-year-old business coach, and outfitted her with earplugs, a head-mounted optical device that let her see projected images, a “button box” that let her respond to what she saw, and a panic button to stop the experiment. Then she was swallowed by a massive and impressively noisy functional-MRI scanning machine. She spent an hour performing tasks designed to stimulate both cognitive and emotional centers—remembering letters, matching facial expressions—while computers recorded images of her brain at work. This was followed by half an hour in front of a laptop as a postdoctoral researcher conducted a standardized empathy test, showing J. photos—some images benign, some upsetting—and recording her reactions. Finally came an interview with a clinician. Did J. consider herself a wise person? Sometimes—more so when she had time to reflect than when she was in a crisis. Had her wisdom increased with age? Yes, definitely. Had that made a difference? Yes again; she had learned not to act so precipitously, and she was better at seeing the best in others, even if it didn’t show on the surface. All of this information would be collated with results from dozens of other subjects and combed for insights into the neurology of compassion in older people; those results, in turn, will add a tile to the wisdom mosaic.

The science of wisdom is in its infancy, and as of now there is no evidence, Jeste says, that people get wiser as a result of aging per se (as opposed to learning from experience over time—also, of course, an element of wisdom). And there is no “wisdom organ” in the brain. Wisdom is an inherently multifarious trait, an emergent property of many other functions. (A psychological screening test for wisdom contains 39 quite diverse questions, although psychologists at UCSD are working on reducing the number to a more manageable dozen or so.)

But it does look likely that some elements of aging are conducive to wisdom, and to greater life satisfaction. In a 2012 paper evocatively titled “Don’t Look Back in Anger! Responsiveness to Missed Chances in Successful and Unsuccessful Aging,” a group of German neuroscientists, using brain scans and other physical tests of mental and emotional activity, found that healthy older people (average age: 66) have “a reduced regret responsiveness” compared with younger people (average age: 25). That is, older people are less prone to feel unhappy about things they can’t change—an attitude consistent, of course, with ancient traditions that see stoicism and calm as part of wisdom. In fact, it is well established that older people’s brains react less strongly to negative stimuli than younger people’s brains do. “Young people just have more negative feelings,” Elaine

Wethington, the Cornell professor, told me. Older brains may thus be less susceptible to the furies that buffet us earlier in life. Also, as Laura Carstensen, the Stanford psychologist, told me (summarizing a good deal of evidence), “Young people are miserable at regulating their emotions.” Years ago, my father made much the same point when I asked him why in his 50s he stopped having rages, which had shadowed his younger years and disrupted our family: “I realized I didn’t need to have five-dollar reactions to nickel provocations.”

Other studies find that social reasoning and long-term decision making improve with age; that spirituality increases (especially among women); that older adults feel more comfortable coping with uncertainty and ambiguity. Particularly intriguing are findings by Jeste and his colleagues suggesting that older people compensate for deterioration in specific regions of the brain by recruiting additional neural networks in other regions—an increase in so-called neuroplasticity that compensates for cognitive decline and perhaps brings other benefits. Jeste also notes that the brain circuits linked to rewards lose some sensitivity with age, possibly reducing impulsivity and addictive tendencies.

None of this, again, proves that people automatically get wiser with age (or more satisfied, or more calm, or more grateful). Many young people are wise, and many old people are not. It does hint, however, that aging changes us in ways that make it easier to be wise (and satisfied, and calm, and grateful). And I believe it suggests the need to rethink the meaning of midlife.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, when David Blanchflower and Andrew Oswald and Carol Graham and others began investigating the U-curve, almost no one seemed interested. And now? “It’s ridiculous,” Graham told me. “I can’t keep up with it.” In a few years, science will know a great deal more about the relationship between aging and life satisfaction, and it may even be able to apply some of that knowledge in ways that help us get through the hard patches and be, or become, wise. I believe, though, that the larger significance of the U-curve is not scientific or medical at all, but cultural. The U-curve offers an opportunity for society to tell a different and better story about life in middle age and beyond: a story that is more accurate and more forgiving and much less embarrassing and lonely.

The dominant story now, of course, is the narrative of midlife crisis. Although the idea of middle age as a distinct time of life dates back to the 19th century (according to Patricia Cohen, the author of *In Our Prime: The Invention of Middle Age*), the idea of a midlife crisis as such is quite recent, first appearing in 1965, in an article by the late psychologist Elliott Jaques. In 1974, in her best-selling book *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life*, Gail Sheehy depicted midlife crisis with the example of a 40-year-old man who has reached his professional goal but feels depressed and unappreciated. He blames his job or his wife or his physical surroundings for imprisoning him in this rut. Fantasies of breaking out begin to dominate his thoughts. An interesting woman he has met, another field of work, an Elysian part of the country—any or all of these become magnets for his wishes of deliverance. But once these objects of desire become accessible, the picture often begins to reverse itself. The new situation appears to be the dangerous trap from which he longs to take flight by returning to his old home base and the wife and children whose loss suddenly makes them dear. No wonder many wives stand aghast.

This is not a bad description of how I felt in my 40s. All praise to Sheehy for her insight. Note, however, the element of disapproval that creeps in as “wives stand aghast.” Society stands aghast, too. Almost as soon as it was born, the social narrative of midlife crisis took on connotations of irresponsibility, escapism, self-indulgence, antisocial behavior. Wethington, the Cornell psychologist, found in research she published in 2000 that about a quarter of Americans reported experiencing a midlife crisis, and that many who disclaimed the notion regarded midlife crisis as a lame excuse for behaving immaturely. The term crisis also contributes to the stigma, because it suggests a shock or disruption or loss of control, when the evidence points to something much more like an extended and unpleasant but manageable downturn.

The story of the U-curve, I think, tells an emotionally fairer and more accurate tale. It is a story not of chaos or disruption but of a difficult yet natural transition to a new equilibrium. And I find that when I tell troubled middle-aged people about it, their reaction is one of relief. Just knowing that the phenomenon is common can be therapeutic. Hannes Schwandt, of Princeton, notes what he calls a feedback effect: “Part of your disappointment is driven by the disappointment itself.” If more people understood how common the U-shaped

pattern is, they might be less inclined to make the forecasting errors that contribute to disappointment—and also less inclined to judge themselves harshly for feeling disappointed.

“When I give lectures, I say we’re stuck with this,” Andrew Oswald told me, “but at least you know it’s completely normal if you’re feeling low in your 40s.” He adds: “And when you’re low, you blame the wrong things.” People thrash around for explanations, which can lead to attribution errors and bad decisions. And those, of course, can bring on what really is a stereotypical midlife crisis, complete with lurching change and ill-judged behavior. In my late 40s, my own nameless dissatisfaction, like a parasitic wasp searching for a host, fixed upon my career and pestered me with an unbidden and unwelcome but insistent urge to quit my magazine column—today, right now, what was I waiting for? Fortunately my better judgment and my friends stopped me from acting on what would have been a useless and self-destructive whim. Still, in hindsight, I wish I had been forewarned that the U-curve, not my column, was the likely source of my discontent, and that a lot of other people, and possibly also a lot of other primates, were in the same boat.

Science has a great deal to learn about the intersection of aging and happiness, but I don’t think it is too early to begin spreading the word about the U-curve. And so I tell people in their 30s and 40s that nothing is written in stone, and that they may sail through midlife in grand emotional style—but if not, they aren’t alone, and usually it gets better, so march through it and don’t do anything stupid. When George Orwell was 40 (he died at only 46), he wrote: “Any life when viewed from the inside is simply a series of defeats.” He was wrong, thank goodness—as perhaps I am gaining the wisdom to see.