

Wake-up call: A midlife spiritual challenge

by [Paula Huston](#) in the [January 26, 2010](#) issue

In my 45th year, I “came to my senses in a dark forest,” as Dante says, without any notion of how I’d gotten there. Somehow my life had once again veered out of control, though not in the usual sense: not morally. In that sphere, I was finally looking pretty good. I’d gone to grad school in my thirties and was teaching at a university. I was a published novelist and short story writer, and after a challenging stint as a single mother of two, I’d made a go of it with a new marriage complete with stepchildren. Most important, after a decade of deliberate, repetitive sinning, I’d repented and returned to the church. I was bashfully pleased with myself and content with my middle-aged life.

Then disintegrative symptoms began to appear. I could not sleep. I was afflicted with stormy bouts of tears and couldn’t get anywhere on time, including to class. Parking tickets piled up in the back seat. I bounced checks. Worst of all, I felt as though something malign were trying to claw its way through my belly and out into the open air.

When my doctor welcomed me to menopause, I was relieved to have a scientific explanation. But estrogen loss alone seemed an insufficient trigger for the scope and range of the internal fragmentation I was experiencing. Everything about the life I’d so carefully rebuilt from the ashes of an ignominious divorce seemed to be falling apart before my eyes, though nobody but me could see it. My meager accomplishments, my modest standing in the academic community and my not unimpressive life as a committed parish Catholic were suddenly imperiled. In the midst of this upheaval, I was hit with an urge to leave behind my beloved husband, kids and students and set off around the world by myself.

What was going on? As it turned out, I was not suffering a mental breakdown, nor was I fleeing a life that had gotten too much for me (after a couple of months on the road, I did come back). Instead, I was undergoing a particular kind of conversion

experience, one that I've come to think of as the "third conversion." I designate it the third primarily because in my own life it followed two earlier and equally powerful experiences: one at 15 with a group of charismatic "Jesus people" and the other at nearly 40 after two decades of lonely agnosticism. I also call it the third because the classic conversion experience à la Paul or Augustine is usually bipartite: we undergo an intellectual breakthrough that leads to faith, and we come to moral clarity about the way we've been living our lives. More often than not, these two moments of revelation are conjoined, although in my case they came nearly 25 years apart.

The third conversion, in contrast, goes beyond revelation and repentance into the area of calling and vocation. It threatens our self-oriented spiritual focus—How is my personal relationship with God going? In what ways do I need to improve myself? What are my spiritual needs?—and demands that we take our place in the historical ranks of apostles, prophets and martyrs. It can be enormously destabilizing. Despite my upbringing as a level-headed Lutheran and my later allegiance to a church that locates the source of spiritual growth primarily in the sacraments and liturgical worship, I've become convinced that we experience the most surprising spiritual wake-up calls at the most inconvenient times. When we do, we are faced with a choice: we can avoid or ignore them, or we can close our eyes, hold our noses and take the plunge into disruption.

In scientific terms, conversion is a change from one kind of thing into another, which describes the classic religious experience of turning away from unbelief toward faith or from moral turpitude to repentance. But conversion doesn't really cover the kind of midfaith event I experienced. Pauline-style conversions, although presented as perfectly legitimate cases of divine intervention in both scripture and patristic literature, have spurred interdenominational contention for centuries because they imply important things about salvation.

Here's the argument: Do we have to have one of these powerful, subjective moments of realization to know for sure that we are saved? Most evangelicals and Pentecostals would retort: "How else are we supposed to get assurance about something this important?" Others would wag a finger in the air: "What if most of these so-called born-again experiences are simply the result of momentary enthusiasm and a bad conscience? Can't we also be united with God through the love of a good church community, or through the sacraments?" Many mainstream Protestants, as well as the Catholics and the Orthodox, would respond, "Here, here!"

The third conversion falls outside the area of controversy. No matter how our particular denominations regard the plethora of ways people are ushered into salvation, our shared hope as Christians is that even if we remain completely unaware of what's going on inside us, a true conversion will come to pass, and the love of God will break open our hearts and make us acquiesce to the power of the Holy Spirit.

Knowing that this universal longing is what unites us, we can pick our way past entrenched theological differences and find a description of the third conversion that works for almost everyone. I'm convinced that this is an important exercise, just as I'm convinced that my experience, wild and woolly as it seemed at the time, is so common as to be a cliché. The problem is that most of us lack the intellectual and spiritual framework in which to fit such an event. (The reasons for this make for fascinating reading. Max Weber, Charles Taylor and Dallas Willard, among others, have done important work in this area.) Without an appropriate context, we find ourselves incapable of recognizing a spiritual crisis when it hits; instead, we try to pin our symptoms on a shifting hormonal landscape or on an amorphous psychological phenomenon known as the midlife crisis. We may be faithful people, but it doesn't cross our postmodern minds that the Holy Spirit may be stirring up trouble for the purpose of drawing our minds down into our hearts where they belong.

Benedictine Michael Casey captures what's going on during experiences like these. "Conversion means being liberated by God's grace so that we can at last follow the intimate spiritual aspirations that have long been unheeded, neglected, or frustrated." Taken in this sense, conversion stands for more than the transformation from unbelief to belief, or the change from a morally reprehensible life to a decent one; it refers instead to a significant deepening of faith that results in radical new action. Note the phrase "liberated by God's grace." We are not speaking here about a self-generated spiritual quest, or even a firm personal commitment to take our faith more seriously. Liberation requires an outside agent who has the power to free us from our deep resistance to divine meddling in what we prefer to think of as our own private business.

How does this kind of conversion get rolling? Author Wil Hernandez, speaking of Henri Nouwen's belief about spiritual transformation, says that a startling moment of God-awareness can do it; we suddenly see ourselves as we never have before, and this intense self-awareness can lead us to reverse our direction and head off on the

opposite tack. Jesus attempts to trigger this event in the rich young man, someone Jesus already loves for his dutiful righteousness and lofty religious aspirations, but who is still clueless about what's required for discipleship. The young man, suddenly understanding what's at stake, turns his back and walks away—sorrowful, but clinging to his comfortable life despite what it's costing him.

At other times the trigger is less easy to pin down. In my own case, I felt the buildup of a mysterious tension, an urgent restlessness and a longing bordering on sorrow for several years before I acted. When I finally launched out around the world, heading like a homing pigeon for Christian pilgrimage sites in seven countries I'd never visited, the sad restlessness gave way to tremulous exaltation. I found myself "borne up on the wings of eagles." I began to understand that I was being confronted with the same choice offered to the rich young man. Would I cling to my familiar, comfortable sense of self or would I get out of the way and give way to whatever God was trying to accomplish in me or through me?

Many obstacles held me back, some of them mundane. One was simple embarrassment: I was nervous about what others thought, especially my university colleagues. It was bad enough that I'd become a Catholic after years of loyalty to secular liberalism. Most of them had forgiven me; with much eye-rolling they had accepted my wacky, medieval-sounding Christian pilgrimage. But could they handle whatever was coming next? I myself couldn't imagine what this might be, only that it boded ill for my good name on campus.

I was also stymied by an overdeveloped sense of duty. I was a middle-aged adult, after all, a person with responsibilities. Who did I think I was, dreaming of solitude and silence and the clear blue air of Paul's third heaven? I had students, classes, deadlines and wifely and parental obligations. In some ways, it felt sinful to even think about making the changes that I needed to make if I were going to respond to the calling I was hearing.

Then there was the issue of identity, bound up with social standing. Everything I knew about myself came from my place within a web of relationships. If others depended on me, I also depended on them to show me who I was. One of the most painful aspects of that long, round-the-world pilgrimage was the sheer loneliness of being cut off from my social web. After a lifetime of trying to prove myself to the world, anonymity was particularly excruciating; it crossed my mind several times during the trip that I could die in a strange place and nobody who cared about me

would know. Later I re-experienced these same emotions when I began to extricate myself from these relationships in order to respond to the call. The price of giving up my identity was high: I became, at least for a while, a baffling stranger to myself.

Closely tied to this anxiety was the deep fear of losing the most important relationships in my life, particularly my marriage. As I was moving into the third conversion, Mike and I were on opposite sides of the river in terms of faith. My return to Christianity five years before had deeply stressed our partnership, and the fact that I chose to come back through the door of Catholicism only made things worse. Now he was supposed to understand his wife's sudden urge to travel alone around the world and visit shrines. He admitted later that he was sure I was leaving him—that my confused and pious-sounding chatter about being called was simply a ruse to end the marriage.

Finally, I was impeded by a problem I never knew I had: my hidden but stubbornly entrenched skepticism about the existence of the spiritual realm. Like most postmodern Westerners, I grew up in a culture permeated with empiricist notions about reality. Philosopher Charles Taylor writes that often we consciously hold one set of values and assumptions but unconsciously live by another. The conflict leaves us in a state of persistent uneasiness. As Christians, we know what we should believe and even want to believe, but as members of a society in which science and technology reign supreme, we find ourselves torn when faced with a high-priced spiritual demand. Under these circumstances, it's easy to find ourselves waffling. I found myself trapped between fear of ruining my marriage and fear of missing the spiritual boat; my hidden skepticism provided me with a hundred handy doubts right when I most needed them. Maybe all this disruption could be blamed on menopause after all. Maybe it was strictly a psychological event—the ego overcompensating for an inferiority complex? People delude themselves all the time, don't they?

In time, I realized that the cost of responding to Christ's challenging invitation would never surpass the distress that preceded it or the sadness that would follow if I let it pass me by. I would never experience the joyful fruits of a deeper life in God. In my case, the third conversion did require going on that two-month solo pilgrimage—as well as leaving my position at the university, giving up my novels and short stories for a writing vocation centered on the spiritual path, becoming an oblate of a monastic community, and recommitting to my marriage in a sacramental way that ultimately retriggered Mike's lost faith. None of these steps were easy, but they were worth taking.

As I've spoken with others about their experiences of a third conversion, I've come to realize that the call is always a personal one. The phenomenon is accompanied by a strong sense that certain work in us is finished, that it is time to let go of our self-directed, nicely organized, useful lives in order that God might send us out into the world in a new way that we cannot yet imagine. Unlike the classic conversion experience, which has followed the same thrilling but prototypical plotline for centuries, this other is always unique, and uniquely suited to the person. This makes me think of the Orthodox belief about the "economy of the Holy Spirit." As theologian Vladimir Lossky puts it, if Christ came to restore the divine image in all of humankind, "the Holy Spirit communicates himself to persons, marking each member of the Church with a seal of personal and unique relationship to the Trinity."

In other words, in the kingdom of God we are all meant for something. In midlife, at the height of our powers, and especially if we are already doing good and noble work, it is easy to imagine we have found the vocation for which we were created. When the troubling symptoms of the third conversion begin, it is natural to dismiss them as inconvenient physical or emotional accompaniments to aging. Surely we are not meant to give up the important things we've worked for all these years? Surely we are not to disrupt the lives of those around us by selfishly setting out on the faint and starry trail laid down by the Holy Spirit?

Perhaps not. But if not, then what can Christ's ominous-sounding words mean—"Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it"? If we don't take this statement at face value, then we must assume it's some kind of clever literary conceit or manipulative hyperbole. This assumption is not only wrong, but unjust. Yet we make these sorts of dismissals of heavy-sounding scriptural injunctions when we secretly fear what God might ask of us.

Lest we fear too much, this is what Christ promises: if we say yes to this most personal of invitations, he will bless whatever suffering follows, infuse us with the power of his grace and fill our cup to overflowing. Streams of living water will begin to flow from within us, and then—miracle of miracles—he will send us forth to bear fruit.