



‘I’m 50. Is this really all I amount to?’

I don’t know what I want to do with the rest of my life – how can I solve this burdening existential crisis?

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Dear A&E,

I am turning 50 this year and, almost overnight, I feel like I have lost my footing. I don’t understand the point. I don’t know what I want to do with the rest of my life. I am married, with children and I work part-time but I feel as if I am just coasting. I keep thinking, ‘Is this all I amount to?’ I think I want to do more but WHAT? I feel really lost and hopeless. Is this an identity crisis?

Love Adrift...

Dear Adrift,

There’s a line in a Mary Oliver poem which asks “What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” and has been living rent-free in Emilie’s head since she happened upon it, earlier in the year. It echoes over and over again every time she empties a dishwasher, wakes at 3am, streams an episode of Bridgerton, unpacks a grocery shop. It’s the unwelcome guest in her living room, the one who lingers rather than leaving, a bit drunk and slurry. Emilie has been driving Annabel mad with it, because she wants someone else to tell her what she is for; someone else to provide an answer compelling enough to exorcise her Mary Oliver haunting. All this to say, we understand, Adrift.

It doesn't help, of course, that it feels as if the entire world is having an identity crisis at the moment. All around the globe suspect alliances are being forged, bombs are being dropped, nationalism is peaking, the workplace remains unstable. This is the one of the biggest election years on record, globally, before we even turn to the stress of our own election ballot boxes. Everywhere we turn, there seems to be a tussle for status (best) or – tragically – existence itself. We're revved up by climate change, political change, and the looming AI work-apocalypse, to the point where we feel as if we don't know where we fit in and how we're going to support ourselves. And we don't just mean supporting ourselves financially, although that's a factor. We wonder how we might support ourselves in a way that enables us to flourish, as opposed to just more of this dispiriting, as you say, coasting.

Dearest Adrift, it's no wonder you feel a little helpless. Given these tumultuous times, how on earth are you expected to find your footing again? To work out if you have the energy, the will and the opportunity to change the direction of your emotional/professional/spiritual Titanic? We think it might be time to ease yourself gently into the fertile void. The fertile void is a phrase explored by psychotherapist Dr Julie Hannan in her book *The Midlife Crisis Handbook*. Dr Hannan suggests that it is precisely this aimless drifting that can illuminate the next phase of your life because: "There is power in doing nothing and holding the tension before moving forward. Waiting for true, sustainable interest and enthusiasm for a change of life, pace, relationship or career can take time, and the challenge is to wait it out while increasing self-awareness and identifying your true needs and wants."

One of the obstacles we encounter during these big transition phases – such as moving from one decade to another – is to do with the fact that we are still being run by the values and expectations of our younger selves; values that served us in our 20s and 30s might no longer be useful now. Indeed, they may no longer be applicable to who we are now or to who we hope to become. Long story short: it is possible that coasting for a while could prove to be productive, however hopeless it might feel. As you drift, just stay alert to glimmers and opportunities. Trust that over time, a new path will reveal itself.

If cruising feels too itchy scratchy, we have a few suggestions for you. The first is an easy win: an act of service. Volunteer somewhere. A local library, local primary school, local food bank, local anything. There are myriad organisations, charities and people desperate for assistance. Perhaps this will reawaken your sense of purpose and go some way to start envisioning your life raft, Adrift. Another tool might be even more basic than volunteering: making tiny changes to light up new neural pathways and shunt yourself off autopilot. Tiny changes, not huge, violent shifts. Because, we'd like to point out, there is a difference between gliding along in the fertile void and running around feeling like a battery-operated robot with no soul. So, why not walk a different way to work; brush your teeth with the other hand; go to a different supermarket where you don't know where the eggs are? Just little adjustments to just show your nervous system that change is afoot and welcome.

Lastly you could start thinking about whom you admire; who might be interesting to talk to, to catch up with. Make plans to see these people – people out of your immediate circle whom you might not have seen for a while. Just allow yourself to absorb new sensations, new information. Perhaps by breaking out of your feedback loop you might gain a little more agency. Agency to find the inspiration to write the next verse of your wild and precious life.