

## THE MUDDLE OF THE MIDDLE

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As the days get longer and the snow is quickly melting, I have been thinking a lot about “the muddle of the middle” – a liminal state of being “in between”. It’s not quite winter nor is it spring. The semester isn’t over yet, but it started a while ago. Some of us have been on the job market and are living between the current world we occupy and the imagined one we will be inhabiting in just a few short months. And some of us are preparing manuscripts, presentations, or itineraries for ASA, even though August still seems to be a fair bit in the distance – five months away now as we sit squarely in mid-March.

So what is the “muddle of the middle”? The word “muddle” may be used as either a verb or a noun. As a verb, “muddle” is defined in the following ways: 1) to “bring into a disordered or confusing state”; 2) to “confuse (a person or their thoughts)”; and, my personal favorite, which is particularly apt for academe, 3) to “busy oneself in a confused and ineffective way” (Google dictionary, accessed 3/13/15).

As a noun, “muddle” doesn’t fare much better. It is defined as: 1) “an untidy and disorganized state or collection” and 2) “a mistake arising from or resulting in confusion” (Google dictionary, accessed 3/13/15).

And the middle? The middle often gets a bad rap. Being the middle child, for example, or raising one’s middle finger to register displeasure. Yet sometimes a clear midpoint is something we long for. When engaged in large projects like writing a book, growing a baby, or transforming one’s physique, knowing when we’ve reached the midpoint may bring relief. These long and arduous journeys might appear endless when we’re muddling through, as though we are making very little progress or perhaps even going in the wrong direction (two steps forward and ten steps back). Some middles are insignificant, for example when growing out one’s hair (as I am

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doing now), while others are momentous, such as recovering from major surgery (again, that's me too) or transitioning one's physical sex. And what impact does an ill-defined midpoint have on one's stamina to charge ahead?

Some of our journeys don't clearly demarcate a central point or it may be that a precise end point is uncertain. When do we reach mid-life, for example? What about the middle of our latest research project or course preparation? I know the midpoint of a marathon is 13.1 miles (not from personal experience, mind you), but I won't know with such certainty when I've reached the midpoint of my life or my career. When we do know that we've made it to the halfway point we might get recharged a bit, but in the throes of delivering a baby, grading midterms, healing one's body, or writing a manuscript, it can be awfully difficult to harness such energy and focus. Any lonely too.

Beginnings are filled with anticipation, excitement, energy, and support. We've got our cheering section urging us on as we embark on a new journey. And the end. Well that's often quite a communal celebration as well. We see the light at the end of the tunnel, we receive hardy congratulations and suggestions that we have earned a solid respite once the celebrations conclude. But the middle? The middle can be lonely, listless, and filled with doubt. And muddle.

Just to be fair, middles aren't always "muddles". There are many nice middles. For example, being in the middle of a community surrounded by loved ones, being in the middle of a good book or good sex or even in the middle of town. Also, mid-life might be a comfortable and familiar place.

So, with greetings amid the muddle of many middles, I wish you a happy spring and the strength and courage to muddle on through.

I look forward to reconnecting with and meeting many of you in Chicago this August.