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But Now That I'm 50, Maybe It's a Good Idea!

Bob Basso, Ph.D.



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Looking Back . . .

On June 20, 1989, I put my career as a keynote speaker and management consultant on hold and took up temporary residence in a treehouse at the eighteen-mile marker on the east end of the tiny island of Molokai, in the Hawaiian Islands.

Why?

It was something Dr. Dan said at my annual physical after carefully inventorying several newly arrived ailments: "You're suffering from what we call 'general malaise.'"

malaise(ma-lz; Fr. ma-lez) n. (Fr.; mal, bad + aise, ease) A vague feeling of physical discomfort or uneasiness, as before an illness.

Vague feeling, hell! The shooting pains in the chest, the perpetual migraine, the refusal to accept the mall as the center of the universe, the urge to throw a grenade in the front seat of every automobile with one of those damn atomic blasting car stereos, not to mention total repulsion for acid rain, the melting of the polar ice caps, holes in the ozone, every "How To" book on the market, relationships as an epidemic, gridlock, mail order catalogs, and everything on prime time TV were all very specific! Funny, when you were thirteen they called it "growing pains." Now that you're fifty plus, they call it "general malaise."

"We'll take tests," said the red-cheeked Dick Clark look-alike internist.

So they took tests.

I didn't wait around for the results.

One of the pluses of suddenly being fifty is you completely reject adulthood, lose all respect for outside authority, and start listening to the little heart-voice within. I was all ears. It said, "Go to Molokai. Push the pause button. Do nothing. Listen for further instructions. Little voice, over and out."

I went.

I kept a diary . . . of sorts. When the little voice spoke, I wrote. It spoke in the middle of some of the wildest, most pleasantly absurd times of my life. Answers came in the form of adventure, folly, nature, midnight nudity, sex, conversations with Jack London and Henry David Thoreau, and a very instructive relationship with a maverick cat named John Muir. I'm also certain I was the beneficiary of several suspected whispers from the Almighty.

As I look back, I suppose I was taking a seventhinning stretch, perhaps in search of a mid-course correction, looking for a hole in the clouds to dash through and abandon all this New Age techno-yuppie madness, with its obsessive dependency on nonessentials.

My post-World War II world of hope, pride, family values, and black-and-white movies with happy endings was over. It would never return.

I suspect all "fifty-pluses" have to face up to that jarring new reality. No, it can't be explained away as a "second mid-life crisis" or the simple culture shock of clashing generations. It's much deeper than that. It's a

primal struggle to validate that life itself still has meaning. It's a fifty-plus need to answer a simple question that is at the very heart and soul of our future civilization: are we just changing ballparks, or are we actually changing the game?

I'm not sure that what I learned in my treehouse will help any other confused mid-lifer answer those questions, but if my experiences—sometimes wacky, sometimes profound, but always instructive—spark an interest to search out your own treehouse, real or imagined, I will feel my time spent on these pages was eminently serviceable. Enjoy!

BOB BASSO

When I was fifty, I realized heaven had a mind of its own.
Confucius

In middle age there is mystery. There is mystification.
John Cheever, author

Fifty is God's way of saying 'Stop taking yourself so seriously.' You're not that important. Just remember, when you die, ultimately, the size of your funeral will depend on the weather.
Janet Basso, author's mother

1

I Never Expected Sex at 35,000 Feet, But . . . There it Was

TWA 403 from Los Angeles to Honolulu was the first leg of my flight to freedom. Like Candide, Gauguin, Thoreau, and Lord Jim, I was leaving the madness of modern life with the relative certitude I was going to a better place a tiny, idyllic island in the South Pacific where honesty, nonviolence, and appreciation for a good Guy Lombardo tune was still possible.

I hated to admit it, but the reality was stark, immediate, and overwhelming. I was fifty years old, and nothing in America looked familiar to me anymore the music, the movies, families, the starting lineup of the New York Mets, nothing. Not even the in-flight meal a yellow-green mushy patty with scattered red blotchy dots that could either be red onion or an unknown killer fungus. My 300-plus-pound female seating companion, with the name "Franny" embroidered across the green and white stripes on her sumo-size left breast, read my confusion

and volunteered, "It's vegetarian quiche. This airline is very de rigueur." Her laughter shook both our seats.

I closed my eyes and ran pictures of Molokai Island across my mental screen . . . lush valleys with 400-foot waterfalls cascading onto glittering sandy beaches ringing a land that time graciously forgot.

My intent was not to make conversation of any sort with any human being until I had reached my final destination. But that ended when I decided to stretch my legs in the galley space between first class and tourist.

The Lady in Blue asked me if I would stand guard at the door of the john because the lock was broken. Her name was Patrella, twenty-three or twenty-four maybe, with glistening ebony hair, a sensual centerfold body in a skintight navy blue dress that had every pair of male eyes boiling with lustful possibilities. A small white button sat in the crescent of her bulging cleavage, "Save The Whales." I've never been more aroused by an ecological issue in my life. I was suddenly alive with a young man's passion.

Many not-so-funny voices come calling when you hit fifty. The first arrives just before you are about to blow out the last candle on the surprise birthday cake. It is the loudest and it sticks around the longest. It repeats the same satanic message over and over again. It finally wedges itself in your subconscious right next to that damn forty-foot neon warning sign: "It's a fact that more men die of heart attacks in their fifties than at any other age. Be ready!" The voice, which sounds strangely like David Brinkley, says, "If you haven't made it by now, you'll never make it. Time is running out." It may be the devil's greatest propaganda, because you suddenly find

yourself preoccupied with a whole schedule of bizarre rituals, like timing how long it takes you to get an erection; combing your hair from the back to the front; charting your irregularity to see if a deadly pattern is developing; taking your blood pressure every time you go to the drugstore; looking for incontrovertible proof of life after death; and becoming an expert on everything to do with your prostate gland. On top of all this, there's a pesky army of cross-examining agitators constantly screaming those ultimate questions at you: "What do you do that's meaningful when the dream dies?" "Did you ever really pursue your joy?" "Should you have listened to your mother and taken a secure civil service job, like the mailman?" All these faceless horsemen gallop through your thoughts seeding chaos and pushing all your unrequited hopes and fading promise into yesterday's shadows. A giant clock is ticking. You're fifty, and the warranty on immortality has suddenly expired. You feel it conclusively in every unexplained ache and shortness of breath.

What to do?

The spirit seems to say, "Seek God in nature." The flesh says, "Make it with a younger woman. Real young."

I've always thought that was a pitifully false refuge for aging men seeking to beat death by bonding with youth. But now I'm fifty, and the voice of conscience isn't so rigid and assured anymore. What was once heresy may now be holistic. Who knows? Hell, it may even be a rite of passage. I didn't invent the idea. It just seemed to naturally evolve along with the receding hairline, the stiff joints, and the curve ball that doesn't break anymore.

I thought if the situation did present itself to me, it would have to be a seventeen-year-old petite nymphet named Candy or Morningstar coming up to me after a college lecture and suggesting she get to know my wonderful mind better by inviting me to have some herbal tea with her in front of a roaring fire at her deaf parents' hunting lodge while they slept soundly three floors above.

I was wrong. It's happening now, 35,000 feet above the Pacific, in front of the tourist class john.

We talk.

Patrella is one part kook, one part shrewd entrepreneur (she owns a thriving futon furniture and design business in Carmel, California), and one part genuine defender of the environment. She is refreshingly direct and totally unencumbered by sentence structure. She never bothers to connect thoughts.

"I'm on a ten-day camping trip to a remote part of Hawaii you probably never heard of, Molokai. Well, it's really not a camping trip, it's a gathering of like minds to center our beings with the flow of the planet. Last year we met at Dacca, Bangladesh. I hope you don't mind chatting with me. I really don't want to go back to my seat. Everybody's looking at my boobs. That's very shallow, don't you think? Did you know Madam Curie was Polish? I read that in the in-flight magazine. I have a good friend who's a volcanologist. He's convinced me that the world as we know it started with a volcanic eruption that produced Molokai forty to forty-five million years ago. I feel like I'm going home."

During one of her infrequent pauses for a breath, I fill her in on my mid-life retreat to the woods.

"Gee, you don't look that old. How old are you?"

"I'm . . . forty-one."

She smiles and feels my right bicep.

"But you're solid. You take care of yourself. I like that in a mature man." She feels my other bicep.

I throw her a little test. Does she have a sense of humor? I've always pictured my youthful fantasy lady and I laughing a lot before, during, and after. I figure that's the only way a good Catholic can justify such lascivious adventure.

"I think you'd better stop there, Patrella. If you feel any of my other muscle groups, you're going to send 120 male passengers into cardiac arrest."

She laughs uproariously. The fantasy begins.

A few hours later on the ground, she picks up her khaki camouflaged backpack from the luggage carousel, gives me a one-armed hug and says, "I'll visit you in your treehouse." She flashes me a Betty Grable pin-up poster wink, touches my face gently, and disappears into the crowd.

Was Miss Patrella, the futon lady from Carmel, a phantasm, a construct of fading hope, or is the fickle god Eros finally giving me my shot at immortality?

My loins don't care. They are about to set off the airport sprinkler system. I thought I was turning my back on the world, the flesh, and the devil, but if the dreamy Miss P returns as promised, I just may have to settle for two out of three . . . for the time being.

2

My Life in a Tree Begins

I arrive.

Something's wrong . . . but right. It's yesterday, a long time ago.

I feel it.

The bumpy, twin-engine, prop-driven Hawaiian Airlines plane was a clever deception, that's it. It was, in fact, a time machine left at the inter-island air terminal at precisely the same time I was to leave for Molokai. I somehow wandered into its well-worn, gray belly obviously guided by a mysterious force that only attracts recent AARP¹ card holders. It gave all the appearance of flying east by southeast from Oahu for eighteen minutes over the temperamental white-capped Kaiwi Channel and then making a silky-smooth landing at the Lilliputian Hoolehua airportsleepy, rustic, unobtrusive tenant on a shamrock green sliver between two hulking mountains.

All an illusion.

¹ American Association of Retired Persons

It's definitely yesterday, 1940-something. Where else would the wind gently muffle the sounds of modern commerce. Where else would you see such old wooden baggage carts, a barefooted handler sound asleep, knotty pine ballpark benches in the open-air lobby, rattan furniture, and a clock twenty-one minutes slow. No control tower. No metal detectors or X-ray machines in sight. No regimentation. No signs. No hassle. No hustle. Past the tiny three-table sawdust-on-the-floor bruised mahogany bar. Wait a minute. I'm sure I saw Raymond Chandler, or was it Dashiell Hammet, downing a straight bourbon at that end table. Maybe not. Either way, it's their type of joint.

The brown-skinned wahine at the Tropical rent-a-car counter is a magician. She's warming her baby's bottle, rocking the under-the-desk cradle, balancing two phones on her shoulders, straightening out some confusion over tonight's canoe race practice for both listeners while flawlessly processing my reservation.

She points to my car in the lot across the way. I'm expecting a '32 Chevy stick-on-the-floor complete with a rumble seat. I get a dented combat-veteran '85 Toyota covered waist-high in volcanic red dirt. Yesterday fades.

The magician smiles apologetically. "Sor-ree. We're short-handed. Our lot boy has a volleyball tournament today. I'll take fifteen percent off your bill."

Up the red hill, eight miles past the family farms, a dozen different storybook wooden-framed steepled churches side by side, past the legendary Coconut Grove of King Kamehameha V with its thousand-plus coconut palms planted in 1803 considered a special resting place of the Gods and into Molokai's principal town, Kaunakakai. It's yesterday again. Old Tucson, circa

1910. Three blocks of false-front stores that could easily have found their way into a John Ford Western epic. Names like Hop Inn, Imamura's Dry Goods, The Friendly Market, and Mid-Nite Inn dominate. Old men, mostly retired Filipino cane field workers, sit on benches and exchange tales, stopping only to pay an admiring silent tribute to a passing young lady. Folks shop and gather in small groups to laugh and hug a lot. An old lady with a giant hibiscus in her hair sells fruit from the back of her '52 Plymouth. No traffic lights, so drivers stop and smilingly wave pedestrians across the street.

Molokai is the old Hawaii of Jack London, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Somerset Maughamunhurried, quiet, at peace with itself everywhere a common reverence for serenity.

Well, not everywhere.

A souped-up green Volkswagen with balloon tires and yellow racing stripes comes screeching into town, car stereo blasting at sonic boom levels. The unconcerned teenage driver with the heavy-metal scowl and jet black wraparound sunglasses seems more symbolic than real. A harbinger of the inevitable seduction of modern life. His ugly volume is rattling the tin roof of Malia's craft store. Old men stop talking. The hugging and laughing stops. The hibiscus lady puts her hands over her ears. They all stare and shake their heads, but nobody does anything about it. Obviously Molokians are no different than any Polynesian people. They're genetically unable to assert their displeasure with the white man's devils. Well, I didn't come 2,500 miles to a South Pacific hideaway to have my communication with nature shattered by some orange-haired mutant and his concert from hell.

