

THE 50 WHAT?

In July 2013, just like a lot of people born in 1963, I turned fifty years old. Of course that is a commonplace occurrence that falls to many people every single day, so while it was unique to me, and kind of fun to have a birthday with an 'o' in it, it wasn't something to which I had given much thought. In fact, as far as I was concerned, I was happy and ready to leave my forties behind me. I felt I was in good shape, physically, and while my career success always seems to teeter on a razor's edge, I was holding up. As the saying goes, things could have been worse. But deep down something was niggling, and I couldn't work out what it was.

How this discontent manifested is, in itself, somewhat curious. Would we call it a mid-life crisis? Not really. I mean, I didn't go out and buy a new car, or get an alarming new haircut or a new wardrobe. Nor did I have torrid affairs with women half my age. (At this point, everyone who knows me is shaking their head and saying, 'As if.')

What happened was this: I started to measure things. I began to think about the fact that I had clocked up a half-century. What had I accomplished? At first sight it was a list that seemed more noteworthy for what I had not managed to do, rather than anything else. For example, I had patently failed to invent the internet; I had not been orbited into outer space; nor had I found

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the solutions to climate change, the Middle East problem, Third World hunger or a cure for cancer. And having found none of those things, nor had I been as successful as Richard Branson or Steve Jobs or any of the other billionaire entrepreneurs who, like me, had skipped tertiary education.

As that rather disappointing conversation chuntered on in my head, I then had that glorious moment of revelation which, I imagine, was a bit like a big slap between the eyes with a wet fish.

And it was this. That my life's most amazing achievement is that I am the father of three incredible people: Charlie, now nineteen, Amelia, sixteen, and Esme, fourteen – my beautiful children, all of them smarter, kinder and more warm-hearted than me. And, most gratifying of all, they tolerate my attempts at humour with great understanding and compassion.

So that was it. I could have stopped the conversation with myself right there, but then a really funny thing happened. I had a conversation with my friend Steve.

Steve is one of my best friends. We worked together in the international division of a film studio in London in the early 2000s, and our friendship was forged in the searing white heat of a global marketing campaign. Our boss had retired two months ahead of the launch and we were thus somewhat abandoned. Our nearest boss was 6000 miles away at head office and the eight-hour time difference, and the time-sensitive pressures of the job at hand, meant that we were both making decisions far above our respective pay grades as we got closer to the kick-off. In that intense pressure we had to trust one another completely, and as a result, having come through it without either of us failing the other, we were destined to be friends for life.

So fast-forward again, to the time of my fiftieth birthday: Steve had just come through a lengthy divorce process and, as we recollected my fortieth birthday party – a huge, proper party with a glitter-ball disco and everything – I started to open up about being fifty and trying to work out what I had achieved.

And dear Steve, who can read me like a book and could tell I was struggling, said, ‘You have just turned fifty. You need to write something great and lasting for your kids. Write down the fifty things you want them to remember when you are gone, like a handbook for life.’

That was when the penny dropped, and I suddenly knew that that was exactly what I was going to write. You see, when you get to fifty, you’re not playing any more. By any margin, you’re probably past the halfway point to wherever it is you’re heading and, at the end of it all, what do we leave behind? How do we know we’re leaving the world a better place? I knew I was leaving my best work – my children – but supposing I forgot to tell them something really important?

But there is another reason that the idea resonated so well with me. I think it’s to do with the fact I was raised by parents who, while loving, were dealing with issues of their own and were maybe not as steady as I sometimes needed them to be. I grew up trying to work out my own reference points, my own map of the universe, and while it has done the job, I knew that I wanted to leave my children with a better map; or a guide to their own maps, so that they could get where they want to go that bit faster, perhaps without so many painful lessons.

So it’s all down to Steve, really, so thank you, chum, and welcome to *The 50 Things*.

Peter Dunne

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