

Dear Younger Me: Advice for My 20-Year-Old Self

My diploma was still in an unopened manila envelope on my apartment desk when I stood in front of a crowd of 300 sets of smiling eyes to tell them about what I'd committed to doing for the rest of my life. Though I didn't say it in so many words, at 22, I knew I wanted to change the world for God.

It was the night of our ministry fundraising banquet, and I was in high heels and a brand-new pencil skirt, dressed like I felt. Pulled-together, tight and ready to inspire.

I arrived at the hotel just before the banquet started in a flurry. I brushed past moms of teenagers and grandmothers who were on the committee of this organization and business men and women who had careers about which I knew nothing. Tonight, we'd converged around the truly significant. I didn't think much about what they'd left outside the door in order to be here. We had vision to impart.

At 20, I was a sprinter. Forty felt old, and 30 not yet worth considering. I'd known God for a few years now and time was already lost—there was so much to be done for Him. I was full of vision; never mind an entry-level position when there was a front of the pack.

I wanted my life to show up on the map. My name, written across lives and stories and kingdom impact. (My laundry could wait.)

And this was all before social media.

I could blink, and I would be right back there, except now what I remember about that night is the graying 50-year-old who grabbed my hand after the evening was over and told me she'd been praying for me in the dark of the morning. The worn

creases along the corners of her eyes looked like pencil markings, years of experience shadowing the fire behind them. I remember the mother of four who had a dignified weight to her countenance but yet spent her days carpooling teenagers, unpacking backpacks and warming the sidelines of soccer games. I remember the 60-year-old businessman of very few words—*must be boring to be him*, I thought back then—who, many years later, taught my husband how to pray through his own dark night.

I'm days away from 40 and scanning that crowd all over again. Except this time. I'm not behind a podium, wanting that each person in that room would give their lives to something significant. I'm standing in the back, valuing all that isn't seen but which holds great value—great opportunity—in a room like that, on a night like that.

At 20, what I couldn't yet see was that things like having a name, being a point on the map for someone's life or their day, wouldn't sustain me until 40.

At 20, I didn't know that 300 sets of hands applauding would never come close to how I would feel when I got a private whisper from God, a look my way from the One who made me.

I hadn't considered, at 20 that being snubbed by a friend or overlooked by a leader wasn't actually the end of me but the beginning of a conversation with Him that would alter my insides. I didn't realize that hasty judgment by man could be turned into great validation from God.

All these things that felt like roadblocks at 20 ended up being the very circumstances that made me find Him. In the tireless paper chase for adoption that didn't include ultrasound pictures—about which few friends could understand—I found His eyes on me. When the big church with the beautifully profound vision we helped to start, folded, I saw Him ... seeing me. While I was turning out the lights in a mostly empty home

with mostly empty bedrooms at night, He was most near to me.

God gives a gift in being hidden. Himself.

I didn't expect that I could find Him, just as much, in sweatpants scrubbing the grout along the corners of my bathroom tub on a Saturday as when I was hearing scores of teenagers tell me that I'd changed their lives. (I didn't know that His sending place, for those who actually do change the world, often happens in the rooms without doors or windows, with just Him.)

The "likes," the applause, the fanfare and recognition—we crave it because we were made for it. We scan our social media feed, subtly wondering how we might posture ourselves to be seen and yet (let's just admit it) so often ignorant of the reality that only one single set of eyes can validate the parts of us that He uniquely made.

We resent being overlooked—and yet, could it be that He hides us just so we might find that single set of eyes? Masked, by Him and for Him.

At 40, I'm finding the craving for that set of eyes on me is the only deep-unto-deep passion that can keep me up at night and make me reach toward changing the world, but perhaps in a way that can mostly-only-be validated by Him.

At 40, I'm becoming a distance runner.

When I was 22, I ran a marathon. The hardest part of the 26.2 miles was when the spectators thinned and fatigue set in. I'd been pounding the pavement for hours, and now, no one but the other racers—fatigued themselves—could see or cheer or celebrate. Though I was mentally prepared for this stretch, I can still feel the tiredness in my bones when I think of running that stretch, unseen.

Just after I finished the race, I likened the last stretch

before the finish line, where there were wall-to-wall fans (including a dozen who came just for me) to my wedding day. It had been one of my top five best moments of life. The unhinged cheers of fans whose brothers and girlfriends and children had trained for months for this—sometimes even two times a day, running and forcing their untrained bodies into a submission of the road ahead of them—were knowing. They celebrated from a place of understanding. And I loved that celebration. I was received into the finish chute by volunteers who had been versed in how to care for ones like me who had given months of their life to this. That last stretch was powerful.

At 40 though, I look back on that race with different eyes.

It's mile 21 that I revere.

Months of work, both mental and physical, planning and prayer, and only One saw the point at which I wanted to quit. Only One could truly know how Saturday long-runs at 6 a.m. in the dark danced in my mind as I considered forfeiting it all, 21 miles in.

At mile 21, I met with God—in a way I didn't when the crowds swelled with applause.

It's in that unseen, hidden stretch that I moved from being a runner to a marathoner.

Now here I am, near 40, and being unseen is no longer drudgery. I can't wait to find His eyes on me there.

We are made in secret (Ps. 139:15).

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