Wisdom from the Middle Ages – Questions for Journaling and Reflection

Introduction
1. Our mystics present us with a variety of ways to imagine God: a knitter, a kneader, a flame, a cloud, the ocean. What kinds of images come to your mind when you think about God? Why? Have the images changed throughout your life? List the ways you remember imagining God as a child and the ways you imagine God now. Revisit your list from time to time. Notice any patterns?
2. When I dismissed a group of people (the “Greeks” at my college) as unworthy of my time, it was out of jealousy. What about you? Is there anyone or anything you’re keeping yourself from learning about?
3. The Bible is brimming with mystical experiences. Which ones resonate with you? Here’s a list to get you started: Paul’s in Galatians 2:20, Acts 6:9 and 22:7; Peter’s in Acts 10:34; Abraham’s in Genesis 15; Isaiah’s in Isaiah 6; Ezekiel’s in Ezekiel 37 and 40; Daniel’s in Daniel 8; Zechariah’s in Luke 1; John’s throughout the book of Revelation; and Peter, James, and John’s experience of Jesus’ transfiguration in Matthew 17:1–9.
4. Have you ever had a mystical experience? What was it like? Why do you think you had the experience at exactly that time in your life? Did you share it? What do you think God wants you to do with the experience(s)?

I Think I Hear Middle Age Knocking—Should I Get the Door?
1. Nell Morton (1905–1987) wrote one of my favorite books, The Journey Home. One of her ideas is that we hear one another into speech—that simply knowing that we’re listened to enables us to express our deepest thoughts and feelings. What do you think? What role does listening—to others, to God, and to yourself—play in your life? Morton went so far as to imagine God as a giant ear. Borrow Morton’s image for a day or so and see (or perhaps hear) what happens.
2. How would you describe yourself at midlife? Are you a grease fire, an earthquake, a pair of eyes silently observing, an overflowing vessel, an echoing tunnel?
3. Draw yourself a pie chart with a “piece” representing every waking hour of the day. Note what you’re hearing from yourself during each of those hours. And what are others hearing you say? How alike or different is what you’re hearing and what you’re saying? Try this again a week, a month, a season later. How do the charts compare? What do they tell you about yourself?
4. I define middle age as when you start listening to yourself at least as well as you listen to others. How do you define middle age? How does this compare with your mother’s, or your grandmothers’, definition? How do you think today’s teenage girls define middle age? And how do you think they’ll come to define it when they reach midlife themselves?

Putting the Self in Self-Esteem
1. One of Julian’s visions was of Jesus thanking us for being human when we get to heaven. The setting is a feast over which Jesus presides, “the marvelous music of his unending love showing in the beauty of his blessed face.” And “the Lord said, ‘Thank you for all your suffering, the suffering of your youth.”’
2. When historians write about the Middle Ages, they list the reasons it was so hard to thrive: the Black Death, the carnage of the Crusades, frequent famine, and childhood mortality. What do you think future historians will write about our era? What challenges us, and what blesses us, today? What challenges and blesses you?
3. Have you ever written or spoken about yourself in a denigrating way, like so many of “our” mystics did? Why? Were you afraid? Were you hoping to attract approval? Did you feel this language was expected of you? How did you feel afterward?
4. Julian said that we know ourselves only, paradoxically, by knowing God. What or who helps you know yourself? Is it ever painful, and if so, how and why? Keep in mind Julian’s hopeful advice: “Yet when we know and see truly and clearly what our self is, than shall we truly and clearly see and know our Lord God in fullness of joy.”

Body Language at Midlife: Say What?
1. Hildegard tells us that like billowing clouds and the incessant gurgle of the brook, the longing of the spirit can never be stilled. What does your body long for? What longings for health do you hear gurgling from your relationships, from your spirit?

2. Menopause is a time when a woman is forced to pay attention to her health. Recall other times in your life when you were forced to pay attention to your body. What happened during times when you’ve tried to ignore your body?

3. What do you know about your mother’s menopause? What have other women told or modeled about menopause for you? If you have a daughter, what would you tell her?

4. Here is Hildegard’s visioning of herself as a feather on the breath of God. How does it speak to you in terms of how you desire to live your life? Listen: there was once a king sitting on his throne. Around him stood great and wonderfully beautiful columns ornamented with ivory, bearing the banners of the king with great honor. Then it pleased the king to raise a small feather from the ground, and he commanded it to fly. The feather flew, not because of anything in itself but because the air bore it along. Thus am I, a feather on the breath of God.

5. We’re so often urged to take control of our lives, and yet so frequently are inadequate to the task. How does the idea of allowing yourself to be born along on God’s breath feel to you? Is there still room for you to be yourself?

Gal Pals

1. Beguines like Mechthild of Magdeburg were simultaneously admired and loathed. Why do you think they were eventually extinguished, instead of encouraged? How do you feel about the Beguines’ example?

2. Many Beguines lived in beguinages, communities designed to facilitate the women’s ministries. If you were designing a beguinage, what would it look like? What kinds of services would it provide? What kind of environment would it offer? Who would live in your beguinage? (It’s your beguinage, so men are welcome if you like.) Feel free to draw a map and a list of guidelines for those who live in your imaginary beguinage. How would friendships be nurtured there?

3. Mechthild embarked on two life-changing journeys, one to Magdeburg to become a Beguine in her early twenties, and the second to enter the convent at Helfta toward the end of her life. What do you think these journeys represented to her, and do you think her age had anything to do with it? What do you think Mechthild’s older self would tell her younger self as she set out on the first journey? Have you made similar life-changing journeys? What were you fleeing? Were you leaving reluctantly? Joyfully? Were you in a hurry? Dragging your feet? What were you glad to be rid of? What was the most precious thing you found? Did your age play a role in how you experienced the journey?

4. Spend some time thinking about your friends. If you could bring them all together for a party, who would most enjoy each other? Who is the first friend you remember having? As you recall friends from school, from jobs, from places where you once lived, what do they have in common? How have your friends nourished your faith or helped you to grow? What does your choice of friends tell you about your life?

Depression and Other Nasties

1. Julian describes the devil in detail. Barbara Crafton translates the psalmist’s enemies to be the spirits of sadness and worthlessness. How would you describe the demons that plague you?

2. What are some of the strategies—patience, humor, listening to music, gratitude, anger, painting, long walks, prayer—that have helped you be rid of demons in the past?

3. What have you learned about depression, anxiety, and other troubles, as well as helpful strategies that would be helpful to others? Remind yourself by making a list—and remember to share it with others.

4. Elisabeth went from heaving her psalter across the room to visions so fine they even smelled lovely. Remember a huge contrast in your moods and try to recall how you got from point A to point B. Now, remember what you’ve learned.

Surviving Middle Age with Your Mental Health Intact
1. Remember the story of Mary and Martha of Bethany (Luke 10:38–42)? When Jesus visited them in Bethany, Mary stayed with the men and listened to Jesus’ teaching while Martha busied herself with preparing the meal. Many Christians have used the personalities of these two women to teach us the importance of both reflection (Mary) and action (Martha). How much balance is in your life? And how important is balance to you?

2. When you read the story of my friend Ruth and her assertion that “when you know you don’t have a lot of time left, you sort of lose patience. The big question becomes ‘How do I want to spend the time I have left?’”—what did you think? How patient or impatient are you feeling these days? And what do you want to accomplish during the rest of your life?

3. I was once advised that I had to experience the pain of losing my husband so I could fully appreciate the happy events of life, which wasn’t very comforting, to say the least. I was reminded of this well-intended advice when I read that Julian, a much wiser soul to be sure, asserted that bliss and sorrow belong to the same love. What do you think about the relationship between sorrow and bliss? How has their interplay changed throughout your life?

4. A simple suggestion: Get a CD of Hildegard’s music and let it wash over you. Open your spirit to it, and notice what you feel via the music of a woman who lived nine hundred years ago.

**Say a Little Prayer for You**

1. Studying our mystics has changed my prayer life from being reasonably disciplined (relying mostly on Morning and Evening Prayer in the Book of Common Prayer) to engaging in a constant talk with Jesus. My move toward a more talkative spirituality is a big shift for me, and while the fruits of fixed-time prayer are evident in the solidity of virtually everyone I’ve ever met who prays in this time tested way, I’m enjoying the closeness I feel with Jesus in the everyday moments of my life. What shifts has your prayer life taken, and what have they meant for you?

2. In The Interior Castle, Teresa described the soul as a castle surrounded by snakes, lizards, and other deterrents. Once you get inside the castle, which is as beautiful and rare as a diamond, there are many lovely rooms with the central room—a sort of holy of holies emanating light—the place where the soul is at one with God. How would you describe your soul? What is it like now, and what would you like it to become?

3. Mechthild of Magdeburg claimed that “God has enough of all things, only to touch the soul is never enough for God.” If God’s longing for your soul never ends, what is the eternal longing of your soul? To be loved? To be appreciated? To be yourself? Maybe there are many eternal longings in your soul, and prayer can lead you to a deeper knowledge of them.

4. Consider the following reminder from Teresa:

   *Christ has no body now but yours*
   *No hands, no feet on earth but yours*
   *Yours are the eyes through which He looks with compassion on this world*

   *Christ has no body now on earth but yours*

   Does this make you feel overwhelmed? Abandoned? Empowered? What would happen if you took these feelings to God in prayer?

**Sex and/or Marriage—or Not**

1. What has your life taught you about marriage? Staying single? Being widowed? Getting divorced? Write a letter to a younger woman sharing your wisdom. What does your wisdom say about your experience of God in your life?

2. Catherine of Genoa has a lot to say about difficult times bringing us closer to God. What do you think? In terms of your life, is Catherine on to something? Has your suffering affected your spirituality? How?

3. There are lots of statistics in this chapter. Which surprised you the most? Which did you know were true all along? Which popped out for you? Why do you think that is?

4. Catherine wrote about the fiery love of God:
These rays purify and then annihilate.
The soul becomes like gold
that becomes purer as it is fired,
all dross being cast out.

Having come to the point of twenty-four carats,
gold cannot be purified any further;
and this is what happens to the soul
in the fire of God’s love.

5. How would you describe the love of God? Is it like rays?
Like a hug? Like a distant mountain? What in your life
has purified you? How? And what have you become?

Mothering without Smothering
1. Have you ever connected motherhood and the divine? How does it feel to think of Jesus as a
mother? How does including the image of the divine as mother impact your spirituality? If you’re a
mother, how does including the image of the divine as mother impact your mothering?
2. If, like Dhuoda, you knew you would never see your children (or others you mother) again,
what advice would you write for them? In what ways is it similar or different from advice your own
mother gave you?
3. Catherine of Siena insisted on doing things her way, refusing to marry or become a nun, for
instance, and telling off popes. She seems to have been completely herself, and perhaps this was
part of the fruit of her prayer. Have you ever noticed, in yourself or in others, prayer bringing the
self to the forefront?
4. Beatrice wrote that “Love makes the soul so bold that it no longer fears man nor friend, angel
or saint or God Himself.” At what points in your life has this statement rung the most, or the least,
true?

Office Politics
1. Let Hadewijch’s “List of the Perfect” inspire you. Who are your heroes? Hadewijch listed eighty-
six people, living and dead, who showed that they were clothed in God’s love. How many are on
your list? And why are they there? Say a prayer for each of them, and let their examples inspire
your own life.
2. You’ve probably seen the poster I refer to on leadership and geese. Dhuoda of Septimania
points to stags as a good example of leadership. What animals inspire you, and why?
3. Hadewijch understood our tendency to forget that we are “clothed in love,” as she said, even
when challenges overwhelm us. Do you agree with her that “We deny love her rightful place in
the valleys of life”? Next time you’re in the valleys of shadow, remind yourself that the Shepherd
is with you. You may want to consider making this reminder a constant habit.
4. Recall mentors in your life—older moms on the playground, a really good boss, a teacher who
inspired you. Now write at least one of them a thank-you note. And say a prayer for the rest. Don’t
forget to include a prayer for the young women you mentor.

A Room of Your Own
1. Mechthild of Hackeborn made an extraordinary journey in her life from self-centeredness
toward self-giving. What has your journey been like thus far? What kind of path would you like to
travel? Mechthild took a significant turn at age fifty when she began writing. How have significant
turns in your life manifested themselves creatively? What creative urges do you intend to act on
in the next years of your life?
2. What makes it hard for you to spend time in your inner cell? Is it time? Is it other people? Is it
space? It is yourself? How could your life, and you, change if you respected your inner cell?
3. Spend a little time thinking about the heart of Jesus. How do you think of Jesus’ heart? Does
the metaphor of Jesus’ heart as a kitchen resonate with you? Does the heart of Jesus have
anything in common with your inner cell?
4. My former parishioner, Lily, was anything but an easy person to be near, and yet her finding
the literal cross in the depths of her ordeal inspired me. Have you ever known anyone in the midst
of a trial who has been able to encourage you?

Death: You Might as Well Think about It While There’s Still Time.
1. What does nature teach you about death? How does it make you feel when leaves begin to
drop from the trees in the fall? When you see the first crocus of the spring? Is your grief soothed
by the cycle of nature, or enraged by it, or untouched by it? Or perhaps you have a different
reaction completely.
2. Allow your grief to encompass ritual. It may be as simple as planting an iris bulb each fall
because it was your sister’s favorite flower. Or you may find comfort in praying the Daily Office,
prayers offered throughout the day by Christians all over the world. You can find these in prayer
books like the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer. Some people find great comfort in writing
letters to those whom they’ve lost on anniversaries they shared.
3. Several years ago, I ran across the following quote from the German theologian Dietrich
Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), who was put to death by the Nazis for his role in the Christian
resistance movement. Bonhoeffer wrote,

*Nothing can make up for the absence of someone whom we love, and it would be wrong to try to
find a substitute; we must simply hold out and see it through. That sounds very hard at first, but at
the same time it is a great consolation, for the gap, as long as it remains unfilled, preserves the
bonds between us. It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap; He doesn’t fill it, but on the
contrary, he keeps it empty and so helps us to keep alive our former communion with each other,
even at the cost of pain.*

Do you think Bonhoeffer is right, that God allows the gap between our dead loved ones and
ourselves to exist? Have you experienced such a gap in your own grieving? If so, what has that
gap meant in your relationship with those who have died? With God?
4. Allow yourself to think about how you’d like to be remembered. From my experience as a
parish priest, I can tell you that one of the greatest gifts you can leave your family is to plan your
funeral. It’s a chore few people enjoy, but the peace of mind it will give you is worth the time.
Write a brief description of your funeral—give your imagination and creativity free reign! And plan
one ASAP.
5. Think about the solace you’ve received when you’ve lost loved ones. I describe my own
journey toward solace after my young husband’s death was labored, surprising, difficult, and
slow. How would you describe your journey to solace?

New Beginnings
1. Of all the mystics we’ve met, which one do you connect with most naturally? Julian, Teresa,
Hildegard, one of the Catherines, or Mechtilds or Margurites, Margery, Angela, Birgitta, Clare,
Elisabeth, Gertrude? Why? And who leaves you cold? What are they trying to teach you?
2. I’ve shared with you how hard it was for me to move to Pittsburgh, a place I came to love, so
that when it came time to leave, that was difficult too. Think back on some of the most difficult
changes you’ve had to make. How have they shaped who you are today? What can your younger
self tell your current self to guide you through upcoming changes?
3. How do you begin and end each day? Find a way to focus yourself on God—something as
simple and informal as a quick prayer of “thank you,” or something as elaborate and disciplined
as saying the rosary—at the beginning and the end of the day for a month, and notice any
changes it makes.
4. I hope this book will be the beginning of an enriched spiritual life for you. Perhaps it will also be
the beginning of an online community. In any case, here’s my e-mail:
wisdom4midlife@gmail.com.