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"On the inside, though, I'm exploding. Another middle-aged woman yearning for her teen years, right? One last grab at youth. Rock groupie, anarchist, tree-sitter. Almost anything but this "ordinary" life I lead."

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Sidney Stevens

Rock Wisdom
By Sidney Stevens

I was in an aqua bathrobe on my living-room couch last Easter, lying in the sun and drinking my morning coffee, when my 13-year-old son cranked up the volume on his new CD, "American Idiot," by the punk group Green Day. Suddenly, savage words and rage poured into me undiluted, so familiar I could've authored it all myself. I haven't been the same since.



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Welcome to my midlife crisis. Mind you, this is not how I imagined things would go down at this point in life. In fact, I never really expected a midlife crisis—certainly not the extreme makeover I've read about. I always assumed my "crisis"—if one came—would be more gradual and less chaotic, ushering me silently and without fanfare toward an older self.

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But that's not how it's come at all. Over the past year, a new world of alternative rock and punk music has split me open. Sullen, tattooed, young men with long hair and pierced lips speak to me directly, screaming against the emptiness of suburban life, mourning dreams that never arrive, raging against lies our government tells us and lies we tell ourselves. I douse the lights and blast it into the darkness of my living room. Or wail

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alone in my car. My kids and I decode song meanings and music-video imagery for hours. I know these bands intimately and the depths from which they spring.

Obviously, something's wrong with me. How else to explain it? On the outside I'm the same—neither dangerous nor unbalanced. There's no "M.C." (for midlife crisis) stamped on my forehead. I'm a 48-year-old mom and wife. My days are spent writing, as they have been for years. I drive my kids to ecology club, acting classes and baseball practice, load the dishwasher, volunteer in my community, cocoon with my husband watching rented movies. Two cars. Two kids. Two cats. A house in the suburbs. None of that has changed.

On the inside, though, I'm exploding. Another middle-aged woman yearning for her teen years, right? One last grab at youth. Rock groupie, anarchist, tree-sitter. Almost anything but this "ordinary" life I lead.

"You don't seem your age," my 15-year-old daughter recently declared as we sped down the highway with progressive-metal band Tool grinding away on the radio. "You and I like the same music and everything."

I smiled and savored the high praise. But I also had to wonder, does she think I'm a teen wannabe, too—the kind of woman who ends up wearing too much makeup and too-tight clothes?

There's no denying I'm not overjoyed to see gray hairs and wrinkles. And I do occasionally dream of life without kids, husband, mortgage, deadlines, bills...the list goes on. More days than I like are consumed with mundane issues, like how to get stains off the kitchen counter and whether we should switch to more aggressive mutual funds—issues that seem so removed from the magic I once dreamed for my life.

I haven't forgotten those dreams, all those nights spent musing with friends about what life means and how you decide where it should go. Anything was possible, it seemed, if we had the courage to try. The rock music that fed us—Dylan, the Beatles, Springsteen—pulsed with political and social commentary, rage and revolution. It excited me just like music does today, exposing a world of problems and pain, exposing my own problems and pain, urging me to live a better life.

But there was a difference. I didn't feel it in my deepest marrow. It only poked at my longings and rage, never really reaching them. What I felt was just too big to get my arms around and examine. I was too young and afraid. In the end I just pushed everything in deeper and moved forward—college, career, marriage, kids—never really taking time to ponder it again.

Until now. What I can't tell my daughter is that we're actually going through the same thing—her at 15 and me at 48. That's why I don't seem my age. That's why we like the same music. Midlife is a transition no less dramatic than the troubling, upending teen years she's living through.

Whether my daughter and I like it or not, something compels us both to question who we are and what we want our lives to mean. Like her, I wonder what comes next and how to get there once I know. We both wonder why things are so complicated and why we can't see it all more clearly. But there is one difference. I've been out there for awhile. Half my story is told. I've got a record, an accounting of what's worked and what hasn't. I've tried on other selves, other lifestyles, fashions, and personas and have begun narrowing down what's worth keeping and what's extraneous distraction or dead end. I might not be as wide-eyed as I once was. I know where life can trip you up. I know my limitations. But I "get" her music at a much deeper level than I ever got my own or she probably gets hers. I don't envy her that long climb ahead toward self understanding.

The other night I ratcheted up Trust Me by alt-metal band Three Days Grace, sank into my armchair and let it pour in.

"It's about betrayal," my daughter has explained many times. "I feel like that sometimes when kids act mean." I know what she's saying. I'm sure the creepy, aching lyrics would have touched me, too, as a teen. I remember the minefield that was high school, its exclusive cliques and labyrinthine social games that left the unlucky or unpopular bloodied and out.

But the song hurts so much more now. It dredges up memories of betrayal in all its forms. Betrayals inflicted by others. Betrayals we inflict in the name of love. Self betrayal. As I listen, my life's accrued fury rolls out before me like barbed wire, all the emotional treacheries I've endured—and those I've carefully sidestepped. All the holes left by love I didn't get, but mostly gashes from love I failed to give, resentments that kept me closed, opportunities for enlightenment squandered.

I see now all the ways I've avoided a genuine look inside, pressing on soul wounds, bandaging them with denial, so I don't have to see their true depth and gore. If growth comes from shining light into our darkest spaces, then music is my searchlight, and what I see is humbling.

When hardrocking Audioslave dares the universe to give up its mysteries in Show Me How to Live, I'm right there with them, howling for my own answers. What does life mean and how do you decide where it should go? I asked those questions at 15, but they contain so many more layers now, more than simple black or white. Why were we put on this lovely, troubled planet, and why don't we know how to live better, how to save ourselves? These questions seem more urgent now, my need to find answers more imperative.

Until recently, I assumed my goal was to weather the black hole of midlife, just as I weathered my teen years. Get old demons out, mourn for time lost, missed possibilities, and move on with a lighter load and perhaps a few answers. Raging rock music was merely a means to that end.

But lately I've come to believe there's more to it. I was chopping onions recently and rocking to System of a Down's tender, pounding ballad Aerials when suddenly I was overcome by a moment of what I can only describe as "awakening."

When you lose small mind, you free your life.

My mouth twisted into grief and tears stung my eyes. But this wasn't sadness so much as recognition of something I seem to have always known, but forgot long ago. A sudden rush of knowing. The Truth.

I put down the knife and held on to steady myself, and for just a moment I sensed another place I'm meant to go, beautiful and luminous just beyond the shadows of ego and everyday concerns. The place where your mind finally quiets and your inner voice breaks through. It took this brutal, lyrical song to make me listen and finally see.

As strange as it sounds, I contend that my sudden soul-affinity for the pounding, screeching of alternative rock and punk music is not simply a wish to turn back time, not merely a midlife crisis, but actually a sign of maturity, a giant step toward spiritual growth. What I can't say yet is where that luminous place is I'm headed. What I can tell you, though, is that beautiful head-banging music—the work of poets and prophets, all of them—calls me to live what my soul and heart dictate. It dares me to say something truthful and reach into a blackness I've tried hard not to touch.

My voice is still tentative, but the far-off glow of this other place strengthens it day by day. Rage increasingly washes into forgiveness. The anger that always rose at the thought of some remembered hurt—a cruel word or failure to offer a hand—is gone. There's only lightness now. It's like my mind is clear of weeds and stones, leaving rich soil for something better to grow.

I'm surer of what I know now, less willing to accommodate those in the wrong. But I'm also less judgmental. Rely on compassion, this wisdom calls, err on the side of love, release yourself to something greater, a wisdom all your own, and you won't go wrong.

I don't know yet if I'll ever dwell fully in this new place, this place of wisdom. Yes, wisdom. There's more darkness to wade through before I get there. But midlife and music have brought me to wisdom's path. And maybe that's the point. Midlife isn't really a crisis, but a powerful push toward something greater. Many of us get sidetracked as we wallow in the inevitable darkness, veering in our confusion toward temporary comforts and security—another spouse, a new job, a sleeker car—things that offer momentary reprieve from the fears and truths we must face before enlightenment. But these diversions only delay wisdom's call. When we retreat before traversing the darkness, we fail to glimpse where we're really headed and what we could be.

Myself, I'm enjoying the scenery along the way, rockin' like I'm 15, but with one eye on that glow in the distance.

Sidney Stevens is a freelance writer, book author, and essayist. Her work has appeared in Newsweek, Travel & Leisure, Real Woman, Sierra and New Works Review. She also writes

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