

The spiritual dangers of alumni magazines

By [Pamela Fickenscher](#)

January 10, 2013

If you graduated from college, you know the drill. Every so often a magazine arrives in your mailbox, full of glossy photos of happy, successful people. Some of them might be the professors who taught you oh so many years ago. Some of them might be silver-haired philanthropists who are leaving a legacy for their beloved alma mater. And some of them are younger than you. . . uncomfortably younger than you. Maybe you read an article or two. Maybe you just scan it for familiar faces. Maybe you turn to the back and look for names of people whom you haven't heard from in years, not even on Facebook.

I went to two institutions of higher learning that were large enough to have glossy full color magazines (and another that was not that big). My husband went to two other institutions whose magazines are so glossy you practically need sunglasses. All four publications have an uncanny knack for arriving just at those moments in my life when I am feeling most unaccomplished, most detached from my dreams of earlier years, most stuck in the midlife rock-and-a-hard-place rut between family and career.

I'm pretty sure I'm not the only person who experiences Alumni Magazine Syndrome. I mean, we can't all be tenured faculty at the places where we studied, start our own non-profits by the age of twenty-eight, or give a few millions dollars away.

As someone who now serves on the board of one of these institutions, I understand the editorial purposes that lead to alumni magazine syndrome. Your friendly development officers are not very interested in the middle. They are focused on alumni who can give enough money to support programs and buildings, and on parents who might consider sending their children to an institution that will launch them on a career more brilliant than mine. No one wants to read about people who dropped onto the 'mommy track' because they had a special needs child, or who doing "just fine" economically while they support their aging parents.

But what bothers me most about the flavor of many of these stories is the impression that most worthy work is either publishable or highly profitable, when a lion's share of what holds the world together is neither. Some of the most brilliant people in the world are working on Apple patents that they simply can't talk about, or formulating poems that will not make the Times bestseller list. Some of our most gifted diplomats, counselors and chaplains are professionally bound to *not* talk -- not even to their dearest friends -- about the most interesting parts of their work. And legions of managers throughout the world are taking care of their employees and their institutions instead of spending a lot of time blogging about it or accepting interviews.

Our culture of self-promotion makes it all too easy to believe other people's press and to compare our own very private work with what others choose to make public. Rob Bell became famous because he started a church, a very successful church -- but in the end he found leading that church less interesting than the life of publishing, speaking, and being the kind of public figure who gets written up in the New Yorker. Pastors don't get that kind of press, usually, and if they do, it's often because they have begun to believe their own press a bit too much.

Mid-life ruts are not the magazine's fault, however. Another part of grown-up life is knowing when to put down the glossy magazine get to work in the 3D messy world of caring for the people around you, doing the tasks no one will thank you for, and keeping one's own counsel about whatever ways you might feel just a bit overlooked. For me, it helps sometimes to particularly "count my blessings" in the places where I am bound to be quiet about what I do. I look back at my calendar at all the meaningful conversations that others have initiated because I do what I do. I tally up all the ways our small-time philanthropy has added up to some pretty sizeable numbers, when kept up consistently for fourteen years of marriage. And I pay more attention to how I love the people closest to me, the ones whose trust and respect I most need. That stuff doesn't make for a great glossy article, or even a "noteworthy" update in the back of the magazine. But it is what grown-up life has taught me -- the best education I've ever had.

Originally posted at [Living Word by Word](#)