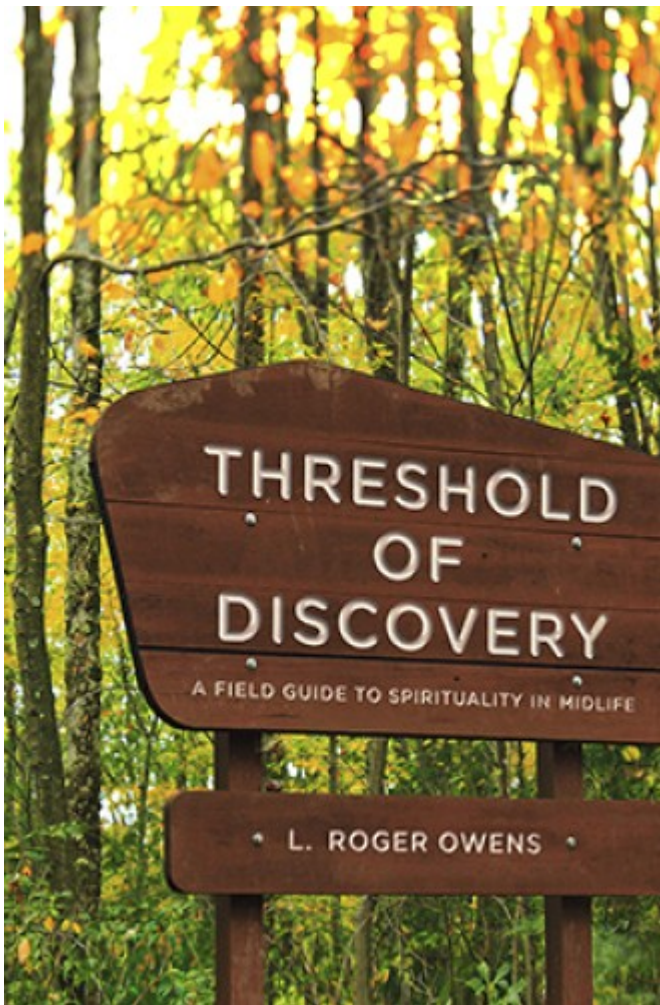


A 40-year-old takes 40 hikes

How Roger Owens walked his way through a midlife crisis of faith

by [Heidi Haverkamp](#) in the [March 27, 2019](#) issue

In Review



Threshold of Discovery

A Field Guide to Spirituality in Midlife

By L. Roger Owens
Church Publishing

For contemplative types, could it be that the language for turning 40 veers less toward “over the hill” and more toward “dark night of the soul”? Approaching that milestone birthday, L. Roger Owens used the latter phrase as he talked with his spiritual director about entering midlife. He was feeling spiritually unmoored. The words of faith and tenets of theology that had once lived and breathed for him now tasted flat. When Sister Anna asked him how he was experiencing God, and what his image for God was at this transitional time in his life, he had no response. He felt empty.

She suggested that he was at a “threshold of discovery,” and in these words Owens found something more hopeful than “over the hill” and “dark night of the soul.” With this new framework, Owens created a spiritual discipline. He decided to take 40 hikes to mark the year he turned 40 as a way to cross the midlife threshold while deliberately trying to discover what God might yet have in store for him.

I was expecting Owens to take hikes in a variety of exciting, far-flung places: Yosemite, Death Valley, the Everglades, maybe Manhattan. But the point of his spiritual discipline was not to find adventure far from home. It was meditation in place. Owens chose to go deep instead of broad. He resolved to walk each of his hikes in the 134-acre nature preserve that is just three miles from his home, northeast of Pittsburgh. He explains: “I suspected that staying close would be key to discovering a spirituality for midlife. I wouldn’t do it by going someplace new and bold, but by revisiting the familiar again and again, by staying in the backyard of my own life. After all, my life is the one thing I cannot escape.” *Threshold of Discovery* is about the everyday, familiar, hard work of living and growing older—including the difficult spiritual adjustments at hand.

Owens finds a suitable walking stick (“If Moses needed a staff for his forty, so would I”) and sets out. The book’s 40 brief chapters each describe one of his walks, tracking the varying trails, seasons, themes, and details of his work and family life, all of which cut paths across his 40th year. Along the way, he explores questions about aging, marriage, family, vocation, doubt, and fear (in particular, his fear of heights, as he steels himself to climb a wooden viewing tower he has avoided for years).

The book includes anecdotes about his three young children, who regularly join him on hikes, as well as birds, which Owens, an avid birdwatcher, notices and describes with familiarity and delight. Owens is also a pianist, singer, and ordained Methodist elder, and he frequently quotes the words of hymn writers, theologians, novelists, and saints. Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Ávila, Thomas Merton, Denise Levertov, and the Quaker mystic Thomas Kelly are some of his favorites.

As someone who turned 40 a few years ago, I have an affinity with many of Owens's words and experiences. Some of my recent realizations—that my body is slowly losing its reliability, that I am moved to tears more often, that my sense of vocation is a moving target, and that my faith is shifting as I grow older—are echoed in his walks, reflections, and rude awakenings.

In a chapter I find particularly moving, Owens compares a visit to his doctor with a visit to his spiritual director. He leaves the doctor's office with many instructions and warnings: "Weight must be decreased, blood pressure monitored, arthritis pain eased, blood sugar lowered. . . . All my stats must conform to the approved graphs and charts." He leaves Sister Anna's office with the sense that growing older, and changing in faith along the way, is natural. "I seem incapable of making her believe any of this is a crisis. I can't conjure in her any bit of worry for my soul, at least not any I can detect. She accepted my disclosures with disconcerting, but also instructive, equanimity. . . . She doesn't think I have a problem." Faith changes over time, just as bodies, vocations, families, and souls do. This is not a crisis; it's a natural progression.

Owens's reflections may resonate particularly well with readers who are entering midlife, especially those who, like the author, have children and live in a suburb. However, there is much in the book that translates across differences, and Owens includes reflection questions that will be useful to reading groups. Walking meditation is an ancient practice, and the season of Lent happens to have 40 days (not counting Sundays). Individuals or groups might use this book as inspiration for their own program of 40 walks—or 40 of some other activity—even if they are well beyond or haven't yet reached midlife.