

Navigating Our 20s

Thoughts and tips for post-college/university life.

Where's my roadmap gone?

Unsure of how to start this blog, I asked friends for tips about navigating their 20s. The response was pretty stark, all summed up by this one message, "No tips. Has felt like a s*** show LOL." This feeling of disappointment or being overwhelmed by life is not brand new to us in our 20s. Still, I wonder if there is something disarmingly unfamiliar about this particular decade in life...

1. For starters, we are no longer all in a structured system like school, college or university, where the next bit of pipeline has at least some form to it.
2. Friends are all doing different things at different paces. That reassuring feeling of sharing significant steps together slips away and comparison can so easily increase its grip on us.
3. Society (and even our churches) often defines, groups and celebrates us by what "life-stage" we're at. When so many life-landmarks are potentially up for grabs in our 20s, it can feel like we have failed or we do not fit if we do not tick the usual boxes.
4. Loved ones start to spread their wings, following the jobs, romances and adventures. It can be isolating and sometimes we have to rebuild our social lives from scratch, without the hubbub of a school or university community to draw from.
5. The ideology we were brought up with might not make sense of the challenges we're now facing. Being confronted with a reality that's different to what we were promised is painful and scary. On top of all the wrestling for reality we might do, the ongoing pandemic has shed light on how fragile life can be. It feels like so much has been stolen from us; from our relationships, studies, work, home life, finances, time, health, society, politics, faith, even our recreation and rest.

Ironically, being in my 20s is the first bit of life that I expected to be defined, sorted and settled; where everything I've done so far in life has led to this moment. I hoped I would be in my vocational sweet-spot, financially stable, happily married by 25, at my physical peak, emotionally mature, and with all the self-confidence-vibes of a gladiator facing a baby mouse. Looking back on the last 10 years, it's not been like that at all.

My dear friend

A while ago I caught up with a dear friend over a mouthwatering Indian paneer. As he filled me in on his news, it was clear that his insecurities had been reeking havoc in his life. I was struck by his level of resolve and frustration. Here is a man who wants to heal, learn and grow. That's a great starting point. So we spit-balled for a little while about how he'd spiralled down and started thinking of ways to break that cycle.

To be honest, my heart was breaking for my friend and I knew that no half-baked wisdom or cheaply built life-plan was going to help. Lost as to how to encourage him I fell silent. I hoped that my quiet listening would be comfort enough. He spotted this and asked me what I was thinking. I fumbled for words as I thought, "Oh crumbs, I have nothing to say." Gaining some sense and honesty, I explained I had been toying with a few sensible thoughts to offer, but none of them were cutting it. Then it hit me. "Mate, do you know that you are blessed?"

A look of shock read across his face. He paused for what felt like an age. "What do you mean?"

“I think God wants you to know that you are blessed.” At this moment I was bricking it. My mate is going through hell, has bravely opened up to me about it and the only word God seemed to put in my mind is one of those flippant, throw-away, Christianised words we use. But then tears started to fall.

It's OK to not have it all together

Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). The very opening lines of Jesus’ teaching are rich with blessings and He tends first to those who know they really need it. He starts with those who don’t have it all together. It is a blessing to know you need God. You are blessed if you know you cannot make it on your own. You are blessed if you know what you’re worth to God. You are blessed if you know we do not need to strive to gain God’s approval or to summon His kingdom. It is His good pleasure (Luke 12:32). It is His good grace. He is intent on blessing His children and His definition of “life to the full” is far from synonymous with our human expectations.

Don't go it alone

I’d like to draw one piece of advice I learned from my friend’s raw and inspiring transparency: share your life. All of it. It only needs to be with a few people. The people that know you well, see things from a different perspective, speak with wisdom, and have your best interests at heart. For me, that mostly takes place with my wife and with friends pray who pray regularly with me. I try to tell them everything, which sometimes means I go into the conversation knowing I have to tell them I’ve screwed up. After a much-laboured attempt to be self-made and independent, I finally appreciated the value of weeping down the phone to my dad one day. That wasn’t an easy level of vulnerability for me or for him. But if I only give those people some of the story, or selectively remember their responses, then I get the advice I want, retain control and keep some secrets hidden. But I don’t need the advice I want. I don’t need to be in control. I don’t need to carry things on my own. Sharing my problems is not to get the approval of a mentor or friend, or to simply tick the accountability box. I want to hear what God has to say through the people God has put around me. These people know me the best and have my best interests at heart. So why sugar-coat anything? I want to know that when my days are a s*** show, there are people who listen, see the whole picture, remind me that I need God and speak God’s blessing over me.

Our weaknesses are worth something

You are fearfully and wonderfully made, and even in the depths of the murkiest pit you have ever wallowed in, your life is still of worth. Sharing your best and your vulnerabilities is meant to be a loving, selfless, generous act. This is how it was for Jesus when he walked the earth, the Garden of Gethsemane being case and point. You never know, telling someone your struggles may be the very thing that breaks down their own sense of isolation. Plus, if we are honest, we are all going through stuff. When we share our stuff, we all have the beautiful privilege of weeping with those who weep and dancing with those who dance (Romans 12:15).

Comparison is the Thief of Joy - Theodore Roosevelt

The apostle Paul challenges us to run our own race free from comparison and with our eyes fixed on Jesus (Hebrews 12:1-2). But that is not an excuse to become cut-off, independent and self-directed. Paul also knows that we are cheered on by a great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1). What a gift that is... to be cheered on by those who stand with us and those have gone before us in laying down their lives for Christ. Accountability does not have to be an uncomfortable and scary discipline with power dynamics at play. Accountability is primarily about accounting for and stewarding our abilities, not our disabilities. At it’s best, accountability is a place of nurturing, supportive, Christ-like relationships (James 5:16; Galatians 6:2) that help us step into everything that God has made us for.

So do not be disheartened whatever your 20s are looking like. God does not expect you to have it altogether or to go it alone. Here’s a blessing that’s been spoken for millennia that I’m convinced He still loves his children to hear:

*“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.”*

Numbers 6:24-26