

Practices
of
Every day
Ethics

VOLUME 3

Practices of Everyday Ethics is a series of pamphlets that muse over the wicked problems and solutions that hope to make good in daily life. They are authored and designed by **Lois Klassen**, and produced by **Light Factory Publications**. As artist-produced 'zines, these pamphlets can be freely shared, exchanged, copied, cited, used as colouring books, or something equally creative.

Volume 1

Yoga Bolsters & Dog Beds

ISBN 978-1-988895-29-1

2022

Volume 2

Meditations on Textile Waste

ISBN 978-1-988895-31-4

2023

Volume 3

MIDLING Memoir & Archive

ISBN 978-1-988895-38-3

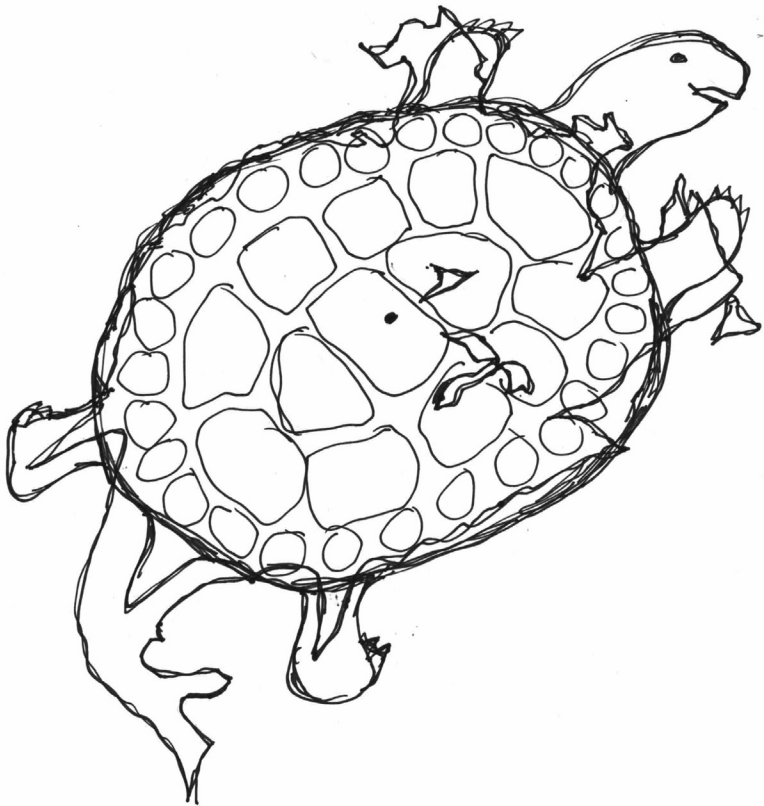
2025

lightfactorypublications.ca

Coast Salish Territory

Vancouver, Canada

MIDLING ARCHIVE



midlyn

The written use of the word middling dates back to the 15th century when it showed up as *mydlyn*. Over the years *mydlyn*, *mydlyng*, *midling*, and *middling* carried meanings including moderate or average (for size, strength, quality, and income); intermediate (for a location or measurement between extremes); half-assed (for a judgment of mediocrity); poor but not terrible (for health and general feeling); and, older but not old (for a person's age).

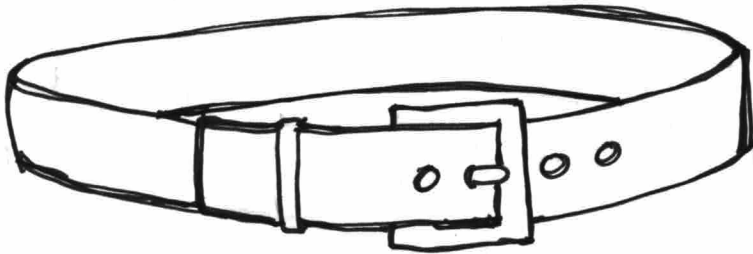
Center

The geographic centre of this continent is located approximately at the blizzard-prone town called Center, North Dakota. Center is a little more than 400 kilometers south of Hamiota in southwestern Manitoba, and about 725 kilometers from where I grew up in the Interlake region, north of Winnipeg.

fair to middling

Between the years 1990 and 2000 when my family lived on a farmyard near the settler town of Hamiota, the answer to the question, *How are you?* tended to get the answer, *Oh, fair to middling*. Calling Hamiota a settler town follows the origins of the word Hamiota, as told to us by

locals. Once called Hamilton, and occupied by more than a few people named Hamilton, the local Dakota Sioux farm workers reportedly took to calling it *Ham-iota*, a Dakota moniker for lots of (-i^{toa}) Hamiltons. A different story is recounted on Dakota Stories, a web-based archive based on oral history from Oswald McKay of the Sioux Valley Dakota Nation (assembled by Ken Storie). According to McKay the name was *Ham-an-i-o-ta*, and, "The name came after the tracks came through[.] Hamani is a train. The train goes through there lots."



unisex

A style of non-binary dressing labeled in retail as unisex was popular in the 1970s. Dianne Keaton rocked the look in the way she played the character Annie Hall: bulky blazers layered over men's shirts, ties, and pleated slacks. The look led to ridiculously oversized suits, shoulder pads, and equally big hair for both genders in the decade's disco and concert scenes. David Byrne pushed it to an extreme in *Stop Making Sense*, the Talking Heads album and documentary. Byrne's suit included a comically padded waist from which enormously wide pant legs swayed to the music.

Today a popular outdoor clothing brand has included the tag *unisex* for catalogue searches. This is their neutral wardrobe for 2025:

- sunglasses
- toques and beanies
- ball caps
- bucket hats
- wide brimmed hats in beige
- headbands
- socks and "sun sleeves"
- gloves and mitts
- one puffy parka in dark green
- buffs and fitted balaclavas
- a few belts

The singer Anohni in a public conversation with Naomi Klein at the Chan Centre in Vancouver in 2025, explained,

People say light and darkness are opposites, but no, light is a fire burning in the darkness. Within the womb of darkness burns light. It is not the opposite. Maleness is not the opposite of femaleness. Maleness pours from femaleness.

Opposite systems are set up to destroy complexity.

And,

So many things are organized in constellations rather than in opposites.



equator

The metaphor of distinct and opposite polarities pictures a round, fat globe with points arbitrarily assigned top and bottom; north and south. With an old fashioned desk globe, the axes are tilted, with the north pole at the top and the south pole at the bottom. The colourful sphere rotates so that you can see the countries and borders whirl by, with the northern hemisphere capturing the onlookers' gaze. If you look closely you can see that the equator is the edge of the two half-spheres, where the light cardboard is adhered with a tiny ribbon of adhesive tape. It is the place that cracks eventually.

easily upset middle

At the beginning of the interview with Omar El Akkad, Chris Hedges begins with a long quote from El Akkad's recent book *One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This*. The excerpt describes how the middle of society relies on depoliticized language,

[It is] the middle, the liberal, well-meaning, easily upset middle that desperately needs the protection this language provides. Because it is the middle of the empire that must look upon this and say, yes, this is tragic, but necessary, because the alternative is barbarism...

El Akkad's book describes the middle of the empire as being "cooned by language" that serves to inure it from seeing, recognizing, experiencing, understanding the depravity of its own aggression.

third space

Is middling an opportunity for the third space? Eve Tuck, in a widely shared letter-essay directed to Indigenous communities, urges communities to establish their own ethical review of research on their own terms. In it Tuck explained that research needs to feed the desires of the communities. *Desire-based* rather than *damage-centred* research breaks binaries. Tuck draws on Edward Soja and Henri Lefebvre to apply the theoretical concept of a productive thirdspace. "Desire is a thirthing of the dichotomized categories of reproduction and resistance," writes Tuck.

In the face of fear-based, reactionary, and extremist rhetoric, progressives are countering with desire-oriented strategies for flourishing, abundance, and mutually realized benefits. Robin Wall Kimmerer's recent foray into economic critique, *The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World*, offers the third space of desiring to share backyard bounty and surplus with those around her. The book's dust jacket highlights this line from the book, "All Flourishing Is Mutual." Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson's 2025 bestseller is *Abundance* and offers a retrospective critique of progressive American policies for denying the population an abundance of affordable housing ("missing middle housing") and climate resilient infrastructure.

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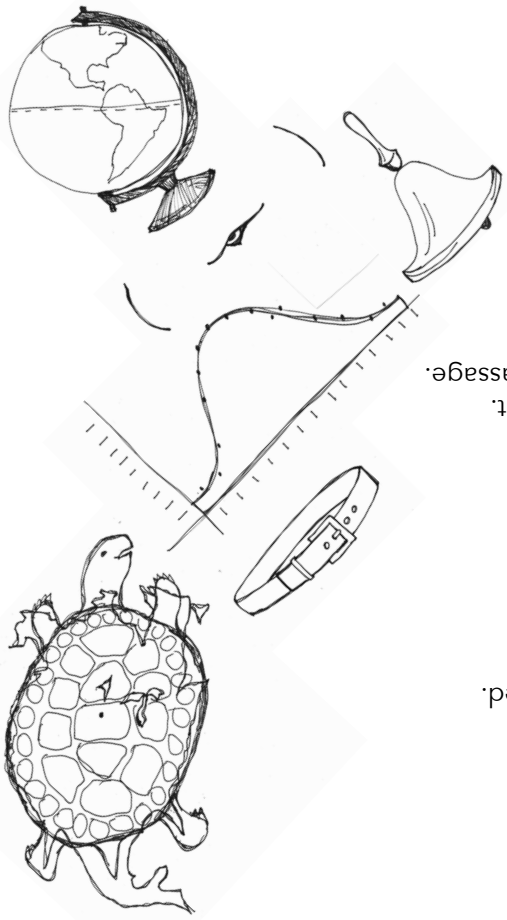
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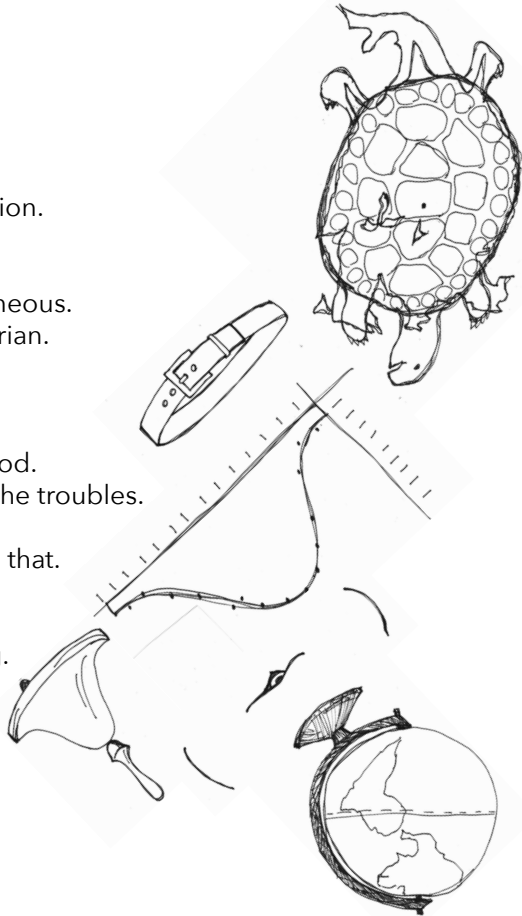
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Middling is east<>west.
Middling is equatorial.
Middling is not belted or cinched.
Middling is menopausal.
Middling is inevitable.
Middling is seventies.
Middling is at sixes and sevens.
Middling is unisex.
Middling is flourishing.
Middling is fraught.
Middling is unsettled.
Middling is okay for the moment.
Middling pictures the middle passage.
Middling says, yes, this is tragic.
Middling is constellations.
Middling is a flow.
Middling is desiring.
Middling is reciprocal.

Middling is multiplicity.
Middling is third.
Middling is collective action.
Middling is not centrist.
Middling is not a bell.
Middling is not homogeneous.
Middling is not authoritarian.
Middling is not uniform.
Middling is ephemeral.
Middling is complexity.
Middling is not understood.
Middling is staying with the troubles.
Middling is neither/nor.
Middling is both this and that.
Middling is yes, but.
Middling is abundant.
Middling is disappearing.
Middling is both/and.



MIDLING MEMOIR



I'm a middle sibling, raised near the middle of the continent, during the middle of the twentieth century. Now living on the western edge of the turtle's back, in a time of polarized and polarizing public discourse and politics, I desire to recall and relocate middling before it is lost completely.

I have always been partial to the soft y in names like *Cyril*, *Wyndham*, *Finn*, *Gwynne*, *Cathryn*, *Lynne*, with one of those assigned to my second son. *Mydlyn* makes a lovely first name.

In an old photo Mydlyn is sitting next to her younger sister, Sarahlynn. They are both wearing grannie square-crocheted vests in dark, earthy colours. On each vest a large flower covers the girls' middles. The yarns are dyed moss green, deep purple, dark blue, and rose. They blend well with the brown sofa and polished wood furniture. The girls smile sweetly at the camera with hands clasped between their denim-clad knees. Mydlyn has a large wooden pendant, a Christian cross, on a chain around her neck. On the wall behind them is an artwork, also made of dark wood, which features small white rectangles in relief, arranged asymmetrically in a modernist array. Mydlyn and Sarahlynn are perched on the peak of the seventies.

The 1970s was not exactly the middle of the twentieth century but was still mid-century. It is part of a thickened bulge of subversive resistance that accumulated in advance of the onslaught of neoliberalism in the eighties and beyond. In *The Subversive Seventies*, Michael Hardt describes the decade's resistance movements as liberation struggles. This contrasts with the way the end of the mid-century is often recalled as activist regression and failure. The seventies brought many setbacks to left and progressive movements including the National Guard attacks on student activists at Kent State University (1970), the imprisonment of Angela Davis (1970), the coup d'état that overthrew Salvador Allende (1973), to name a few. These combined with a surge of terrorist incidents and hijackings, cause the decade to be characterized as the end of civil rights, anti-war, and anti-establishment revolutions of the 1960s. This characterization represents "strategic blindness" to the liberation aims of the seventies, according to Hardt. Movements for gay liberation and intersectional feminisms of the 1970s grounded the progressive and revolutionary projects of today. From them Hardt highlights themes of *autonomy* from authoritarian states and institutions, *multiplicity* of intersecting identities and access, and demands for revolutionary rather than liberal *democracies*, that together produced 1970's calls for liberation as specific and material.

The documentary *Crip Camp* opens in 1971 at Camp Jened, a summer camp for youth, who in their usual lives were house-bound and dependent on others. At camp though, the youth found opportunities to reflect on the personal and political impacts of their limited autonomy and envision together the disabilities rights movement.

Pictured in the movie is the 504 Sit-in of 1977 when Camp Jened comrades led by Judith Heumann occupied US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare buildings in San Francisco. They demanded, and won, the signing of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, prohibiting discrimination against people on the basis of disabilities. The accomplishments of the disability rights movement in the seventies made accessibility an ethical practice in my Occupational Therapy education in the eighties.

Sally Armstrong in promoting her 2019 Massey Lectures (*Power Shift: The Longest Revolution*) explained,

Consider this, the crash test dummy is a man. So, his pelvis is in a different place to my pelvis, and he sits farther back from the wheel than I sit. So all that expense, and all that research and work done on vehicle safety is done for men, not women. I mean a pregnant woman with a seatbelt? This is a problem. We've never solved it. Women working in construction, she can't get a glove that fits her. A woman in the military can't get a flak jacket that goes over her breasts. A woman in construction can't get a boot small enough. So, these issues have traveled with us and it's a matter of sidelining half the population.

For those living through menopause, fat stores estrogen near to the body's centre, padding the ovaries from sudden hormone depletion. My middle age spread grows and grows, with a pound or two every few months. As estrogen production wains after ovaries have stopped their cycles, fat cells love to accumulate in the middle. I've added sit

ups to my exercises. Feet hooked under the sofa, I feel like I am back in grade school gym class.

In the 2004 artwork, *Standards and Double Standards or Rasero y Doble Rasero* by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, men's leather belts, looped and buckled, hang from the ceiling in formation. They are parallel to the ground at the level of an average man's middle. A tracking mechanism rotates the buckles to face those entering the room. The invisible men seem not to be flabby or contorted since none of the belts are cinched, curled or askew in any way. Straight and uniform they are oppressive, even in their emptiness. The artist's statement refers to a man's belt as a "fetish of paternal authority." What is standard and double standard about an average man and an average man's belt?

The bell curve is three dimensional, a pediatric neuro-psychiatrist explained to us as our child with a new Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnosis played with books and toys on the floor of his office. This was before the use of words like *neuro atypical*, *neurodivergent*, or *neuro-spicy* had liberated the lexicon. The psychiatrist was explaining ASD as outside of the middle of a three-dimensional bell curve. Two people with ASD might be opposite each other on the bell's edge, for instance. That would cause a significant difference in relatability, said the psychiatrist.

The bell curve, also known as normal distribution, is a statistical tool used for predictive data analysis. If the belt sizes for adult men in a representative sample of the population are arranged along a graph

with width measurements (from thin to wide) plotted on the x axis and numbers of men possessing these sizes noted on the y axis, the resulting shape is expected to resemble a bell. There will be a few people whose middles are very slim and a few very wide, but the largest number will be found in the bulky middle. Or so it is expected of the bell curve.

Despite the apparent neutrality of statistical numbers and models, the bell curve is also alluring. Tests that produce answers along its bell shaped distribution tend to get privileged over those that need other statistical models to understand them. With only a few outliers at the top and bottom, the bell curve promotes a belief that most of us live and behave in a unifying and coherent middle. The bell curve as a model has us believe that where there are outliers, the bulk of us will neither need to understand them nor be threatened by them.

Kathy Mantas and Lorinda Peterson, the editors of *Middle Grounds: Essays on Midlife Mothering*, say that this middle is nothing like being centred or balanced. To hold the responsibilities of mothering, while living through midlife, is ambiguous and contradictory. Of the many contradictions is the responsibility to protect those in their care while expecting them to feel empowered, for instance.

In *Middle Grounds*, Tobi Jacobi a mother, university professor, and writing instructor in a local prison, recuperates the term middling as an acknowledgment that much of the time she meets the demands at the level of inevitable mediocrity. She admittedly "middles" her way

through weighty responsibilities of four children, students, women writers experiencing incarceration, and can end her essay in 2017 with the words, "It is fraught, unsettled, and okay for the moment."

During Black History Month, on what is likely my only trip to Australia, I face the term "black-birding". It appears in the Australia Museum inside the exhibition "Wansolmoana: One Salt Ocean". The artwork *Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa/Middle Passage* by Jasmine Togo-Brisby is a diorama that sits in a museum vitrine next to explanations about a colonial slave trade in the South Sea Islands. The artwork is an all-black scene of a small sailing boat with three feathers as sails, atop feathered waves. Completely made of taxidermied crow feathers and wings, the artwork's ship is like a silhouette, and the glimmering black water is like an unending wing. The artist Togo-Brisby describes how her great-great-grandparents were blackbird children stolen from the island of Vanuatu in 1899 to work in Sydney as servants and plantation workers. This phase of the ocean-born slave trade was mobilized in the mid-nineteenth century, after the abolishment of slavery in the Atlantic region. Togo-Brisby appropriates the term "middle passage" for the South Pacific region, to emphasize the continuity and pervasive expansion of slavery and colonialism.

The Paul McCartney song, *Blackbird*, flutters by more than once during my Australian trip. At one point, Jon Batiste's performance of it in 2016 at a Beatles tribute on *The Late Show* appears in my browser. I listen to it with my travel companion. We watch as Batiste sits at a gleaming black piano and begins with a long improvisation on the

familiar melody and harmonies. He transposes the famous guitar lines which McCartney said had been inspired by a Bach lute suite. Batiste's beginning is a fluttering of notes and then firm chords. Only well after we hear it as a jazz piano rendition does Batiste sing, "Blackbird fly | Blackbird fly | Into the light of the dark black night". McCartney has described that in 1968 when he was writing Blackbird he was considering the "broken wings" and "sunken eyes" of those fighting for civil rights in America. Batiste's version avoids those deficits and offers birds in full flight, with dark black nights full of light.

Before working with the designer Victoria Lum I had made a few publications that had slips of paper and even string wrapping them closed. Lum said the design term for these closures and containments was *belly bands*. We made them a feature of the series, *Reading the Migration Library: Poetics and Actions*. They were mostly used to hold together loose items in packets that we called artist books and zines. In commercial book design belly bands are used to add colour, texture, and additional text that doesn't fit on an image-focused cover. Artifacts of middling culture like belly bands are generally ephemeral. They get battered or lost, and tend to be culled by librarians in custody of open public collections.

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