

The Life Report: Matthew Kirk Gooding

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The following [Life Report](#) was submitted in response to [my column](#) of Oct. 28, in which I asked readers over 70 to write autobiographical essays evaluating their own lives.

So far—I'm 70—I'd give my life an "A". Ask me again tomorrow, or in ten years. It is obvious that character, luck, sexuality, nature, and nurture play an equal part in this grade. I have discovered that I am responsible for my own behavior. How I respond to anger, desire, anxiety—that is the key. Anger has been my companion since I was little. When I react with anger I have to learn to love myself again, realizing that it will take time for others to reestablish trust in me. I practice paying attention to my out breath. I have been lucky—I was born into the middle class, and books lined the walls. No one died until I was twelve. Then mother did. Dad and brother followed. Death has ever been on a pale horse galloping by my side. Basketball was my center through college. I went to William & Mary. Got kicked off the team in my junior year. Was allowed to play my senior year without scholarship. It was a good year. After ten tries I got into medical school. Girl friends came and went. I had no clue how to respect women. Betrayal has been a tendency of mine. I went to Viet Nam as a doctor. Was stationed in the base camps. It was exotic and the images seared into my brain—conical hats, green mountains, red roads, the South China Sea, dreams of bombers flying overhead. The horrifically wounded on the orthopedic ward at Walter Reed. Depression. I married a Danish woman who I thought was 5'6". She was 5'3". We courted in Hong Kong, Singapore, Bangkok. Two lovely children, but I never committed to my wife. General Practice in Ashland, Oregon, starting in 1972. Delivered thousands of babies—many at home. Metaphorically, I was asleep all those years. Got divorced. Was more self-centered than I knew. Probably had never left the basketball court, always reacting by throwing elbows. Still do. Spent two years in Sun Valley commuting on weekends to get a degree in counseling psychology from Pacifica in Santa Barbara. Moved back to Ashland not realizing how disruptive I had been in the medical community and otherwise. Met my present wife—my best friend. She stayed. So did I. My kids stayed in Ashland, got college degrees, married, are raising families. Since age 60 I have practiced letting go. More and more paying attention to the out breath. I make sure each day has stations. Recently, I collected all my poems under hard cover. I began painting when I was 64. There is always a canvas on my easel. My office and my living room are galleries bright with color. Conical hats, red mountains, turquoise seas. I began the study of classical guitar at 68. I read constantly. Often several books at once. I spend time reminiscing as I slide back towards oblivion. Reminiscence is a balm for me. Family, patients, music, art are about remembering and listening to stories, about the necessity of self-forgiveness. I am lucky to have the time and leisure to practice listening. Maybe it has helped me become more loving. I think so.

