

Life is Like a Rocking Chair

Rays of Hope for People in Crisis

Faith and humor can help us to pass through valleys of misfortune and find the courage to climb to new heights. »Our journey through life resembles a rocking chair,« says Oliver Meidl, inviting you to partake of his thought goulash of light-hearted and thought-provoking musings, offering encouragement to go the »extra mile« with a smile.

Oliver Meidl, MBA MAS, is an IT project & program manager with international experience in Europe, America, and Asia, and serves as an honorary deacon. The father of three has authored several books.

Oliver Meidl

**Life is like a
Rocking Chair**

A Little Book of Encouragement

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The German edition of this book is titled »Das Leben ist ein Schaukelstuhl.«

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*Dedicated to everyone attempting
to bring a smile to the faces
of the people around them.*

Goulash of Thoughts with Sermon Dumplings

»I bet you like to cook goulash!« – We had never met before, and yet a training seminar participant said this to me with great conviction during our introductory guessing round. That may be true to the extent that I occasionally cook up and write down a »thought goulash« just like this one in front of you.

It begins with the observation that an eventful life resembles a rocking chair which leans in one direction, other times it leans in another. »Wait a minute, didn't you say you weren't writing any more books?« asked a friend whom I had last spoken to after my presentation at the »Long Night of the Churches.«¹ Since then I had begun to collect material for sermons, came across quite a few previously unpublished texts, and gained new insights through interactions with special people.

It had taken a while to digest all the *previous setbacks*. My serious illness, my wife's passing, and the Covid crisis had presented my family with severe challenges since 2016. It was in 2022 when I felt that things were improving again. The children were doing well, my professional commitment had begun to bear fruit, and my after-hours training as a volunteer deacon was nearing completion. Being interviewed on the radio and making an appearance on TV added to my motivation.² On top of that I rediscovered the joy of writing.

This »*Little Book of Encouragement*« is filled with anecdotes illustrating ways to overcome crises in life and discover new

hope. Examples include the friendship between a *Siberian kitten* and a *parakeet* as well as the impossible equation »*two plus one equals firefly*.« Next, sample some early humorous texts about *goldfish*, *banknotes*, and *noteworthy conversations*. »*Caritas is a Flower*« is the flowery title of a chapter about »*The Holy Bible and charity*.« Then there are »*Tears of Joy in Vienna*« at wedding ceremonies and baptisms that I conducted. »*My Worst Sermon*« is about the »sermon dumpling« – a lump in the throat when preaching – and looks at the challenges of public speaking. »*An Intense Farewell*« reflects on mourning over personal loss and on grief counseling. »*The Life-saving Courage to Leave Gaps*« discusses professional performance expectations, and »*Poured Out Like Water*« is all about vocation.

I discuss conflict resolution strategies both in the worldly and the religious sphere in the chapters »*A Need for Harmony*« and »*The Good Shepherd and His Not-So-Peaceful Sheep*.« Food for thought is provided by the appeal to »*Do as God Did and Become Human!*« Passages printed in italics add anecdotes and my personal light bulb moments to the text. Bible quotes follow the New International Version, the King James Bible, or the respective source cited.

Please join me now for a hearty meal of written thought goulash. I hope *you will enjoy* this little book!

Oliver Meidl, Christmas 2024

Life is Like a Rocking Chair

Why do we do what we do? Do snakes have ears? And why does a rocking chair rock? – On different occasions, we may have to pause and think a bit to find good answers to children's questions or to explain local customs to friends from other cultures. Stopping to consider why we have always done something a certain way can be beneficial.

Children can really pester you with questions! Asking all those questions helps them to make sense of the world that surrounds them and to better understand life. Even the Bible says, »If your child asks you in time to come« (Deut 6:20). What follows is a retelling of the freeing of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Nowadays it can be an entirely different situation where God leads us out of great need: an accident, a diagnosis, an unlucky coincidence, or misfortune which all of a sudden comes upon us and turns life upside down.

From time to time, our life may benefit from a pause so that we can afterwards move ahead with renewed focus, increased motivation, and greater determination. »Doing some soul-searching« means an honest look within yourself to take stock of your life and where you're at. The following pages are a synthesis of things I have experienced and learned. This has resulted in new encouraging messages on *cheerful, sad, and biblical topics*. They form the basis of a »*thought goulash*« that covers the entire »Easter spectrum« from sorrow and grief all the way to rediscovered joy of life.

On the occasion of the birth of our second child, my wife wished for a rocking chair. She sat there to nurse our little daughter and rock her to sleep. The gentle rocking had an incredibly calming effect,

far from the hustle and bustle of everyday life and the pressure to perform. Sometimes I was the one to occupy our rocking chair and read funny stories to our son – among them the adventures of Donald Duck, who had one unlucky experience after another. »That's tough luck!« we say when something goes very wrong. And when things are going well for us, we beam like the sun. It's an up and down ride like sitting in a rocking chair.

I have been richly blessed in my life. The contact with many dear people around me as well as friends and colleagues from all over the world has inspired me. I am grateful for my family, for my work, and for my vocation. Even after more than twenty-five years in the same company, I have never become bored – quite the opposite as a matter of fact. And when I also get to meet and support special people as a deacon, the rocking chair of my life goes way up.

The chair with rockers was invented overseas. Its history goes back to the days of the Pilgrim Fathers, who settled in Massachusetts as early as 1620. Benjamin Franklin popularized the »rocker« in the United States. With President Kennedy, a rocking chair also came into the White House. »It gives you a sense of motion without any sense of danger,« the U.S. President explained.³

Sometimes one highlight chases the next. There is one success after another. For a while, everything is in balance, but then things start to bounce and the rockers of the rocking chair start creaking dreadfully. The winning streak is replaced by a persistent losing streak; by painful experiences that pull your rocking chair down.

The period between 2016 and 2018 was such a low for me. One setback was followed by another. My biggest professional achievement to date with managing a multinational IT rollout program was

promptly followed by my diagnosis with leukemia. The rocking chair of my life first rocked me to lofty heights and then plunged way down. When my wife fell ill and died shortly afterwards, it tipped over and broke into pieces.

»Your situation is unimaginable for most of us,« a friend remarked. On some days we may dissolve into grief, even though we know that we have someone by our side who won't ever abandon us. »Worrying is like a rocking chair, it gives you something to do, but it gets you nowhere,« the New Zealand cricketer Glenn Turner observed.

When we are in crisis mode, we find support through trusting in God, and in the understanding and the help of many kind people through whom God's face shines. They carry you through times of disappointment when seemingly everything you have built up is crumbling and falling apart. When setbacks unsettle you and the rocking chair of life is in ruins.

Only little by little do you realize the blessings that you still have: all the well-meaning people around you, structures that are still there to support you, and the assurance that »in everything God works for the good of those who love him« (Rom 8:28).⁴

Perhaps the most important thing I have done in my life was not to give myself up to despair during my illness and after the passing of my wife. It was important to be there to provide our children with the best possible support I could give them under these circumstances.

With God's help and the help of many wonderful people, I began to reorganize my life priorities. I wanted to be there for my family, so I stopped going on business trips and instead worked remotely from home after our local offices closed – a sort of head start on the

Covid travel restrictions. In addition, I completed training as a deacon and sorted my thoughts anew when I wrote a book with the motivational title »Be Strong!« – a »goulash of thoughts.« It took me quite a while to build myself a new »rocking chair of life.«

It takes strength and perseverance to overcome strokes of fate. Much time may pass before you feel that you are sitting firmly in the saddle again, and it may still take a while until you're able to climb new peaks after spending time in the valley. In a cumbersome transition process between one phase of stability and the next, you may almost run out of courage when it seems you can't make much progress. Perhaps it was a similar experience that led the German-Canadian businessman and publicist Willy Meurer to remark that *life is often like a rocking chair. You think you are active and agile, but you hardly move at all.*

Our life's journey truly resembles a rocking chair. At some points in life, we just can't get any further. Then we feel dizzy as if our rocking chair is spinning, and if the tension causes the seat to fly apart, we may quickly find ourselves sitting on the floor, paralyzed – frozen in shock. *»Son, be of good cheer,«* Jesus called out to the paralytic and lifted him up (Mt 9:2).

Yes, sometimes life takes us for a ride. Although we may often have no choice about the situation we find ourselves in, we can still decide how we react to it. Do I put on a deeply sad and gloomy face from now on because I am simply disappointed with life, or do I grin and bear it, give myself a push and do my best to turn things around?

Although I certainly can't undo the hardships of the past, I can positively shape the present, my life here and now, and set the course for a good future so that the

rocking chair of my life reaches new heights before I lean back in its cradling safety and look back on what things have been.

It took me about five years to overcome the numbness and put my biggest low in life to date behind me. The feeling of having surfaced again only came when my children were on a good path, and I was nominated as a »top performer« at work again for the first time in years. In the meantime, I was able to gain my first experience with conducting baptisms, weddings, and funerals.

Life's a Joke!

Life is beautiful! There are plenty of wonderful moments that we can enjoy, the beautiful nature that surrounds us, caring people, and valuable insights that we may gain. Of course, there are also gloomy times in life, when a belly flop into murky waters alternates with miserable missteps. On life's rainy days, we often find ourselves discouraged and powerless. All of a sudden, the door to self-motivation is closed; we lose the ability to hold a carrot in front of our own noses, which we could chase so that we would keep moving forward and not get stuck in the mire of our everyday worries and fears.

»Have faith!« – Firm faith is my key to a fulfilled life. It »unlocks« the gates of life and gives me strength on dark days. But when I misplace the second key, the gate only opens a crack, and the chain prevents my entry. I'm still stuck outside, especially under very demanding circumstances.

»Have fun!« – The key that unlocks the extra lock is humor. »Have fun!« the key reminds me, along with »Don't let things drag you down!« Just as we are called to holiness, we are called to humor. Spirituality and fun are a

»power duo.« With a smile, it is easier to cope with and resolve situations.

»That's got to be a joke!« we say when we really don't want to believe something. »You're nothing but a joke!« we yell when we find someone's behavior annoying. Life isn't always smooth and not everything is wonderful. Sometimes it's quite an annoyance! And yet, isn't it also amusing when we take a slightly more distanced and humorous look at our everyday adventures?

We are in good company when it comes to laughter. Even in the Bible, Abraham and Sarah laughed with joy when God granted two such elderly people a child (Gen 18:12). Hence, they called their son Isaac. His name, »יִצְחָק« (yitshak),« translates as »[God] laughed« (Gen 21:6). Sarah's silent chuckle caused God himself to pause for a moment and ask: »Why is Sarah laughing?« (Gen 18:13).⁵

»Hilares in gratia Dei« sums up the medieval maxim »Cheerful by the grace of God.« Cheerfulness is an attitude towards life that enables serenity – a wholesome contrast to tense seriousness. It demonstrates an assurance that we can rely on God's gracious support even when life becomes almost unbearable.⁶

»By their laughter ye shall know them« – this is a twist on the Bible verse »By their fruits ye shall know them« (Mt 7:16). The reaction to a humorous question can actually reveal a lot about people's character. Do they laugh good-naturedly with the joker who is teasing them, or does the laughter get stuck in their throats because they fear being ridiculed? At times there is a tense relationship between humor and religion. Is it okay to joke about »absolute truths?« Or may we joke about how imperfect and all too human our approach to God and our idea of him is? Jokes play an important role here: they help us to cope with

ourselves and the world in the face of our own deficiencies, as is evident in the apostle Paul's »fool's speech« (2 Cor 11:16–12:13).⁷

The Kitten and the Little Bird

As a kid, I loved playing with »Schnurrli« (Purr-Purr), our neighbor's tabby cat, and its son which went by the legendary name of »Mutzmutz« (Mew-Mew). They even briefly moved in with us and hid the young kittens in the basement behind our freezer. But the get-away attempt failed. Back then, my grandmother was reading the children's book »The Last Little Cat« to me.⁸ The story was about the last kitten in a litter that nobody wanted. In wind and weather, it sat alone in a cardboard box on the street. We never got to the end of the story. Because I was crying so hard, we always had to stop. I hope the poor, abandoned thing didn't die miserably, but found a happy ending after all. Many people have to go through a tough school of life early on. Life is like bread: at some point it gets hard!

Our lives changed when we got a young kitten which kept bringing a smile to our faces. For many years, we had thought that a cat wasn't an option, cat allergies and all... A Siberian cat breed solved the issue in a very pleasant way. Its name was inspired by a Bible verse in Acts 16:14, and the children often put »Little Lady« in front of it. Sometimes my hand was badly scratched from playing with the kitten. »Oliver, you're a kitty martyr,« our parish priest said to me. But the kitten was incredibly cute and loved to play, pry, and poke around. Each new day was an adventure for the kitten.

With a young kitten it is supposed to be like this: After three weeks, it has become accustomed to its new home. After three months, it will feel perfectly at home. By now it has forgotten its former home. After three years, the cat is the undisputed ruler, and everyone has

to do as it says. In ancient Egypt, cats were practically worshipped, and this has been in their genes ever since, my daughter explained to me.

Cats were commonly kept as mouse hunters in Egyptian households. As »homebound« pets though, which like to stay in known territory, they played a minor role among the Israelites, who lived in semi-nomadic family units, and in their Holy Scriptures.⁹ While the lion, »mightiest among beasts,« appears quite frequently in the Bible, for example in the vision of a divine chariot-throne (with the symbols of the evangelists) as well as in numerous comparisons (cf. Prov 30:30; Ezek 1:10), its little sibling is only mentioned in one passage in the Book of Baruch: »Bats, swallows, and birds alight on their bodies [bodies of idol worshippers] and heads, and so do cats« (Bar 6:22); an allusion to the Egyptian cat goddess Bastet, the daughter of the sun god Re, who was worshipped as the goddess of love and fertility. Cats also protected the granaries from pests, and the ancient Egyptians (perhaps younger ones as well) even consulted cats before passing new laws.¹⁰

When our kitten discovered our parakeet, it found a little friend. It fell asleep by the bird cage and the two would occasionally sniff at each other. Like the legendary lamblike lion, our house tiger looked after its feathered friend. »And the lion shall lay down with the budgerigar.« The little bird didn't seem to mind much, although the kitten must have looked gigantic from its perspective. Quite the contrary, it returned the affection. Nothing is as precious as time spent together. Naturally, there are different points of view in life. They can coexist peacefully. So I would look at these two little fellows and wonder if they

were »best friends.« »Gratitude is the key to the joy of life,« I read the other day.¹¹ Unfortunately, the budgie was already old, fell ill, and passed away. It's hard to lose a friend, even for a kitten.

On Christmas Day, our kitten was in seventh heaven: all the packaging material, boxes, and wrapping paper to play hide and seek with! The kids came up with a poem to express their enjoyment: »The kitten, the kitten, she doesn't dance to the beat, she has four feet. The kitten, the kitten, she doesn't need a leash ever and never swims in the Seine River. The kitten, the kitten, your hand will be bitten, for she is a wild one and likes to have fun, but she is also fine and small, that's why she doesn't like pigs at all.«¹²

Kittens learn to hunt at an early age. A friend's cats brought their kittens something very special. A live mouse, a »training mouse« so to speak. Then again, cats and mice can also be friends. One friend had an unusual range of pets: cats, mice, and prawns. Our kitten liked Thai food. I brought her »Me-O« cat food from Bangkok, which it devoured greedily. Probably after wondering where I had been for so long.

House cats don't understand that we leave our homes to go to work and do a bunch of things. Perhaps they think we go hunting for food to feed them. That's why they are so grateful and happy when we come home unharmed. Because it's dangerous out there!

Out there, it certainly is dangerous for cats! Some naughty altar boys allegedly had fun throwing cats off the Inzersdorf church steeple in the postwar era. The poor kitties survived the fall from more than ten meters completely unharmed as they flipped around in the air, reduced their falling speed by spreading their legs, and landed on their soft paws. They then trotted off on their four little legs as if nothing had

happened. It is not without good reason that people say, »A cat always lands on its feet.« Which, by the way, cannot be said of worms...

Two Plus One Is Glowworm

One fine day, I only caught fragments of my children's conversation. So when I asked them what they had been talking about, they told me, »Well, about two plus one.« To my question, »And how much is two plus one?«, they replied: »Just those glowworms!« Puzzled, I repeated slowly, »Two plus one is glowworm?«

As it turned out, my kids had been talking about candy, glowing sour gummy worms offered at a bulk discount: »Two plus one for free.« One thing that has not changed for thousands of years is that people talk past each other. I am reminded of the conversation Jesus had with the Samaritan woman at the well about living water (Joh 4:1–26) or with Nicodemus about spiritual renewal (Joh 3:1–13); there are plenty of examples.

In one of his cabaret programs, Lukas Resetarits mentioned a nice example of people talking past each other. During a quiz show, a candidate reportedly responded to the question about Austria's »state form« right away: »Club-shaped. Look it up on the map!«¹³

Another myth and misconception is that we automatically become wiser as we get older. A lifelong maturing process also requires reflection, recognition of your own weaknesses, the insight that the world doesn't revolve around you alone, and that there's no need to be always right – a real relationship killer by the way.¹⁴

Robert James Waller, author of »Bridges of Madison County,« mentioned two signs of maturity. The first is the ability to laugh at yourself. Many people clearly take themselves more seriously than they need to. They are not able to laugh at all the absurd things they do. Another sign of maturity is when we admire other people for their skills with-