

# Twenty-Someone

FINDING YOURSELF IN A DECADE OF TRANSITION

Craig Dunham & Doug Seven



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WATERBROOK  
PRESS

TWENTYSOMEONE  
PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS  
2375 Telstar Drive, Suite 160  
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80920  
*A division of Random House, Inc.*

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ISBN 1-57856-695-9

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Dunham, Craig.

Twentysomeone : finding yourself in a decade of transition / Craig Dunham and Doug Serven.—1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-57856-695-9

1. Church work with young adults. 2. Young adults—Religious life. I. Title: Twentysomeone II. Serven, Doug. III. Title

BV4446.D86 2003

248.8'4—dc22

2003016559

Printed in the United States of America  
2003—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## I n t r o d u c t i o n

*Those like myself whose imagination far exceeds their obedience are subject to a just penalty; we easily imagine conditions far higher than any we have really reached. If we describe what we have imagined we may make others, and make ourselves, believe that we have really been there.*

—C. S. LEWIS, *The Four Loves*

*It's stasis that kills you off in the end, not ambition.*

—BONO, *Rolling Stone* magazine

When I (Craig) was ten, Kurt Bielema and I thought it would be a swell idea to try our hand at aerial photography, detailing the many nuances of my family's one-hundred-year-old, six-hundred-acre farm in west central Illinois. Despite the fact that neither of us had our pilot's licenses (for obvious reasons—did I mention we were ten?), both of us were more creative than society should allow kids our age to be. This was not going to be a problem.

Rather than let mere inconvenience stop us, we rigged a heavy fifty-year-old Kodak something-o-matic camera I found in the attic to the underside of a cheap Batman kite. We then attached a separate line to the Kodak's plastic manual lever on the side. We had three rolls of kite string, each one thousand feet in length, and a howling wind blowing in from the north. Our plan was that once we got our survey gear in orbit—say about half a mile up—we'd pull the string attached to the camera and take a few shots. The scary thing was we were really serious about all this.

Unfortunately, after several tries and even more disappointment, we never got the kite-camera off the ground—the thing required more thrust and physics than we could provide. To add salt to our wounds, we had declared to our families that we were going to come back with satellite-quality photos from space; thus, we were in a bit of a bind.

To save face we went into a harvested cornfield, started jumping up and down with the camera pointed at the ground, and took a few pictures. It was a good try, but that's about all it was. In the end our families were not fooled by our attempt to present what we had not really captured.

In this book we want to provide a survey of the twenties—a real survey, no cornfield mock-ups—to help you discover yourself in the midst of this decade and make the most of your time there. Our ideas come from our own experiences and those of others, as well as some good old-fashioned observation, interpretation, and application of lessons. As we go along we'll do our best to ask and not assume, to prod and not preach, and to help instead of harass.

While we offer many practical suggestions at the end of most of the chapters, these aren't meant to be the meat of the book. Rather, they are suggestions and applications we and others have worked out with regard to the concepts we're talking about. Jumping quickly to those ends may work, but you will be like the blind squirrel that finds a nut once in a while—lucky.<sup>1</sup>

We'll warn you: We're new at writing about the twenties. But you're probably new at reading about them too. Maybe you're somewhere waiting for the subway or sipping cappuccinos in a bookstore or snuggled up with a blanket and some James Taylor playing in the background. We wrote this book for you because we think you are the ones who are really listening. You've tried some things, you've had the thought that it would be helpful to get a little guidance, and you're ready to pick up a book and consider what it says. Together we've been where you are (and recently too), and we think we can share a few thoughts to stimulate your thinking along your own quest.

This book aims at being real, which means we must deal with the ugliness of life in order to understand the glory of it as well. We hope to save you some grief by sharing with you a semiconcise approach to making sense of the process of discovering who you are and why it's important you know. We hope we'll help you feel a bit of weight come off your shoulders. And we hope to move you from being a twenty-*something* (and a cultural statistic) to being a

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1. Provisionally and sovereignly lucky, of course.

twenty-*someone* (and who God has made you to be), discovering and doing what you enjoy because you know what you enjoy and why.

Throughout the book we will offer some personal stories as well as concentrate on some enduring principles we've found helpful. Let us qualify this idea of principles, since anytime there are principles there are also exceptions. For instance, try completing this English example:

know/knew    grow/grew    throw/threw    \_\_\_\_\_/flew    snow/\_\_\_\_\_

In the first blank, *fly* doesn't follow the pattern established, but *flow/flew* just won't work. We tried, but in the second example, *snew*<sup>2</sup> doesn't quite fit either. The point? While we need patterns and principles, there are also ins and outs of life that have their own specific rules even when the principles are applied. While we always want to live by principles, we recognize the need to suspend them once in a while as well. Figuring all this out is how and when life gets interesting—and probably where you find yourself living right now.

We won't try to offer the ultradefinitive word on things, but we do want to provide insights we've gathered from our experiences over the past ten years. We hope they guide you through your own experiences and encourage you to interact with the book, yourself, and others as you examine your life thus far and consider what lies ahead.

One more thing: We've made a ton of mistakes and are in no way perfect people. In fact, we're two of the worst sinners we know who do too many stupid things to mention; but a book about all our sins doesn't sound like something you'd want to buy. We've tried to apply the principles we talk about, but by no means have things turned out roses all the time (that's the way it works—*snow/snew*, remember?). We've sought to learn from our mistakes, try anything once, and not get burned twice. So far it's been a good way to live.

As James Thurber once said, "You might as well fall flat on your face as

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2. My (Doug's) daughter Ruth woke up one morning and said, "Mommy, it snowed last night!"

lean over too far backwards.”<sup>3</sup> Alas, we might. But let’s at least fall forward together, dream some dreams, and figure out who we are in this decade of life so we can make a positive impact on those who will follow us.

In all of this, of course, we hope that it doesn’t feel as if we’re out in a cornfield jumping around with a camera. Here’s hoping we get the kite in the air.

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3. James Thurber, “The Bear Who Let It Alone,” *New Yorker*, 29 April 1939.

## The Question of Our Twenties

*It will be in vain for me to stock my library, or organize societies,  
or project schemes, if I neglect the culture of myself.*

—CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON, *Letters to My Students*

*It doesn't happen all at once...you become. It takes a long time.*

—MARGERY WILLIAMS, *The Velveteen Rabbit*

**M**r. Craig Dunham is entering the decade of Career, Kids, and Marriage!” So read the sign hanging on the door of my dorm room at the University of Missouri. These words, posted by the girl I was dating at the time, were also part of the first entry in my first-ever journal, dated February 5, 1991, the day I turned twenty.

While the sign seemed somewhat silly at the time, I think I missed its point. Career, kids, and marriage are all big things, sure, but they were just the tip of the iceberg of what was to come. You may not have had an embarrassing sign posted on your door on your twentieth birthday, but you might remember wondering what this new decade called “your twenties” would be like. And, like me, you may not have had a clue as to what you were getting yourself into.

Now when we say “your twenties,” we don’t mean to name a hard-and-fast delineation of time when we enter through one door and exit through another.<sup>1</sup> That would mean you have exactly ten years to figure everything out

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1. But *Eighteen to Thirty-Five Someone* just didn’t seem to work as a title.



and get going! We know that life does not necessarily respect age, nor does it give a rip as to how old or young we are when the proverbial poop begins to hit the fan. And since God made us different from one another, each of our experiences will be different.

But as different as *people* are, *life* is sometimes not quite as original. In other words, there are just some things (being on our own, figuring out what we believe, first job, first firing, career choices, car, house, getting married) that most of us encounter during our twenties. The reality is, most people experience more drastic life changes in their twenties than in any other stage of life, especially when we realize that marriage and kids and career—alone or in any combination—are going to be as much or more work than we thought they would be. With all these changes comes the need for good answers, and these good answers only come when we recognize our need for the right questions.

We trust that many of these issues are fresh in your mind. You're probably realizing that life isn't what you had expected in some areas and is far better than you had hoped it would be in others. How can we sort out these experiences and evaluate what we're all going through? Just what *is* the right question to ask?

### The Most Important Question

What's the first question you were asked when you graduated from high school? We'll bet money it wasn't, "So, who are you going to become?" Are you kidding? It was, "So, what are you going to do now?" Although it's a fine question, performance immediately becomes the topic of conversation, reinforcing our behavior to please externally rather than be aware of our internal self. As a result of this mind-set, a lot of people in their twenties have no idea of their gifts and abilities, spiritual or otherwise. They might have a well-documented résumé but not be able to answer questions such as, "What are your strengths and weaknesses?"

While we may have an innate desire to know who we are, we may sense a lack of true identity in a world consumed with titles, positions, and stereotypes. We may start to believe the lie that, in the midst of a ridiculously paced

culture, we just don't have time to stop and smell the roses. If it continues unchecked, this lack of time for reflection sets us up perfectly for the midlife crisis we've all heard about: We turn forty, change jobs, divorce our spouse, leave our kids, and run off with that cute guy or gal we met working out at Bally's, in hopes of "finding ourselves" by starting all over again. Or, for a scenario that is a bit milder, we may start to wonder if we've been in the wrong job all these years, our self-image may take some serious blows as we start to confront our mortality, and we might withdraw into a shell of television every night so we don't have to deal with any of these pounding thoughts.

Our twenties should not be as much about finding a job as about finding ourselves. Thus, the most important question to ask is not *What do I do?* but *Who am I?* This question can be difficult to answer because we may not know where to begin, but it is the key to understanding who God has made us and why—two important questions we need to answer in our twenties.

You may already be asking, "Who am I?" and perhaps you have attempted the "search for yourself" by way of experimentation—with drugs, sex, ideas, music, or rebellion. Whatever is different seems good in the quest for who you think you might be. In that scenario, however, who you are and who you are becoming comes not from within but from without.

The funny thing is, in answer to the question, *Who am I?* we're prescribing the same treatment: experiment. But not with drugs, sex, and rebellion. Rather, with concepts, jobs, groups, and places. The goal isn't to figure out the kind of person we *want* to be or the identity we think we *should* assume, but who it is God has *made* us to be and how *he* wants us to be identified. We need to experiment, to ask questions, and to explore to determine these things so that when we do commit ourselves to particular concepts, jobs, groups, and places, we'll have the assurance we're in the right place after all.

When we focus our energies on asking and answering the right questions, we begin to see what priorities we have or don't have. Of course, we could overdo all this and go on a ten-year vision quest, but that isn't quite what we're talking about here. In a nutshell, we're saying we should *take* the time to *make* the time to *evaluate* the time. We're talking about, for instance, valuing experiences over promotions, character over titles, and understanding over production.

For example, say you're presented with the opportunity to go to China for two years to teach English in an international school. Though you don't really want to teach for a living, you should consider how going to China could help you answer the who-am-I question. You may not end up going, but don't dismiss it out of hand. Consider the cultural difference it would make in your thinking if you walked on the Great Wall or came back with some deluxe chopsticks. Give some thought to the idea of returning to the United States and having great conversations with any one of the millions of Chinese people living here. Consider how such a trip would raise the bar in your evaluation of bad American Chinese restaurants.

Regardless of whether or not you go, you might find that if you can get out from under the pressure of the career track/corporate ladder to think for a moment about other options, you'll learn something about yourself. China may or may not be the best thing that could happen to you in the long run. The important thing is that you considered it as the possibility it could be. You thought through the decision in light of the who-am-I question.

How about character over titles? Which would you rather be: a sleazy corporate vice president or an honest busboy?<sup>2</sup> Is the desire to drive a Beemer really worth the sacrifice of character sometimes required to fulfill it? We all know the answer is no, but living out that answer (and being content with the probable outcome of doing so) is tough. A content heart and a humble spirit don't just happen. They take work, ultimately the work of Christ. At times character will cost us the titles, kudos, and perks we think we want.

Next, consider the balance between understanding and production. Many educational systems value the right answers in the right blanks. If we are raised primarily in that system, we might end up going through the motions to figure out what is on the "test" instead of learning the material and what it actually means. Sure, sometimes we just have to learn what's required, but that doesn't mean we have to stop there.

Other educational systems value exploration and creative problem solv-

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2. Not that there aren't honest V.P.'s and sleazy busboys, mind you.

ing, relying more on what you *feel* than on what you *know*. This can keep us from the reality that truth is independent of our experiences and emotions. The point is to learn about the world in order to learn about ourselves and contribute a little something to civilization. This is a big deal, and now, not later, is the time to think about this stuff.

### Why “Who Am I?”

From childhood we’re raised with a presumed twelve to sixteen years of education as a standard prerequisite for “growing up.”<sup>3</sup> As a result, we are accustomed to the idea that life is broken up into three- or four-year chunks (elementary, junior high, high school, college). We don’t think twice about it; this is just how it is.

It comes then as a bit of a shock when we realize that the majority of our lives are not so segmented by “the system,” and we are solely responsible for those years. Suddenly life seems short and our choices seem desperately critical. We start focusing on mere survival. Commitment to anything becomes scary because we think we have so much to lose.

As we pursue work, career, and family, we need to relax and give ourselves permission to try different things and experience life for the first time on our own, not wallowing in desperation about those monumental decisions that “have” to be made. The reality is that where we go to college usually doesn’t come back to haunt us or “get us in” somewhere. We may make decisions based on what career path we think we want to travel or which ladder of success we think we want to climb, but the truth is, most people end up with a job that has only a slim connection with their college major.<sup>4</sup> We may think something will be exciting, but instead it turns out to be excruciating. We dread the idea of taking one opportunity, and lo and behold,

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3. We realize that this hasn’t always been the case. If you were born in a different time or place you’d have been “grown up” long ago. Adolescence is a fairly new idea. But here we are, so we have to deal with our place in life here and now.

4. Us, for example.

something absolutely life changing ends up happening. Life and our enjoyment of it are simply not determined by the first decision we make, whether good or bad.

In their book *Repacking Your Bags*, Richard Leider and David Shapiro write:

Life is not meant to be linear. The path from birth to death is not a straight-line journey; it's a zig-zag.... The linear point of view says first get an education, then work hard, then retire so you can finally begin living. But by that time, many people have forgotten how to live, or else they're so exhausted by getting to where they've gotten that there's no life left. The alternative is to live all your life as fully as possible. To challenge the existing script. To wander as opposed to sticking to the straight and narrow. Of course, this is scary and isn't easy, as it means we have to continually ask questions about our life, our love, our work.<sup>5</sup>

Let's face it: If the average life span of a person is, say, seventy years, one or two years are not going to have that much of a detrimental impact on the overall outcome of our lives. Even if we forgo that internship we were offered, graduate late, take a year off to work, or do whatever else we've thought about doing, success and accomplishment are just not that dependent on our making every decision perfectly or within a self-induced time frame. Our view of God needs to be bigger than that.

We sometimes forget that some of the greatest people in history didn't make their marks on the world until they hit their thirties, forties, fifties, or even sixties. Instead, we allow our culture to pressure us into having everything figured out and wrapped up in a nice, neat little package by the time we're twenty-five years old. Is this realistic? Is this healthy? Is this how it usually works? We don't think so.

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5. Richard Leider and David Shapiro, *Repacking Your Bags* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1996), 76-7.

## The Chance of a Lifetime

We can't adequately consider the answer to the question, Who am I? without the intention, encouragement, or structure with which to process it. And yet, as you've probably already experienced, in the workplace, the classroom, and even the church, personal *development* is not valued as much as personal *production*. This should not be, but unfortunately we don't see things changing anytime soon—unless the change begins with us.

It can be a frightening proposition. In J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Two Towers*, the hobbits are lost in the forest, and Aragorn is trying to figure out if his small troop should undertake the dangerous task of going after them. Finally, after some consideration, he says to his friends, "There are some things that are better to begin than to refuse, even though the end may be dark."<sup>6</sup> So it is with us.

None of us knows what lies ahead. We'll probably experience amazing times of rapturous joy as we live life to the fullest as well as times of anguish when we wonder if we can exit the bed once more in the morning. In a sense, we don't have a choice to stop completely and get our lives together because life happens regardless, but in another way we can take Aragorn's challenge and begin the journey of finding ourselves along the way. We can go for it with all we have, knowing that the journey will most certainly entail battles and rests, goblins and companions, and maybe even some mystical elven wine and dancing at Rivendell when all is said and done.

Regardless of the details, this is your big chance to make the most of your twenties. Sure, you're busy, and yes, you have other things to do. And you're human and make mistakes. But now is your chance—the chance of a lifetime!—to make the most of the rest of this amazing decade by taking the time

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6. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (New York: Ballantine, 1963), 53. The parallel we're trying to draw here is inspiring, except for the "dark" thing. Not sure what to tell you on that one, except that while Aragorn and the crew end up in a bunch of caves with little to eat before eventually finding the hobbits and saving the day, maybe the worst that will happen to you is that you'll end up in a poorly lit coffee shop sipping bad coffee. Who knows?

to do things thoughtfully and prayerfully, answering the question, Who am I? as you go.

Our prayer for you is that you come to embrace the idea that the decade of the twenties is the most strategic decade of development in your life.<sup>7</sup> In the midst of a barrage of new experiences and opportunities, your patterns of thinking develop and change. The foundations of your character and world-view begin to solidify, and upon them you will eventually build the structures of your life. How you manage and evaluate this decade of time has a direct impact on the integration of your theology, person, and aspirations for years to come.

The journey starts in earnest now, for as the map in the mall reads, “You are here.”

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7. There, we said it.