

# Reflections on How We Live Our Lives<sup>1</sup>

## *Brad's Status*

By Walter G. Moss 20180505

It is obvious to many viewers and [film critics](#) that *Brad's Status* (a 2017 Amazon production) is about the midlife crisis of Brad Sloan—effectively played by Ben Stiller. What's not so obvious, however, is that the film provides a great opportunity to rethink one of the central questions we

---

<sup>1</sup> Source:

[https://www.academia.edu/36369058/\\_Brads\\_Status\\_Reflections\\_on\\_How\\_We\\_Live\\_Our\\_Lives](https://www.academia.edu/36369058/_Brads_Status_Reflections_on_How_We_Live_Our_Lives)

should all be asking ourselves. It was one, for example, that greatly troubled the great Russia writer Leo Tolstoy: “How should we live our lives?”

As I have described [elsewhere](#), at the age of 47—Brad’s exact age in the film—Tolstoy wrote to a friend that he felt old age had begun for him. He defined this as an “inner spiritual condition in which nothing from the outer world has any interest, in which there are no desires and one sees nothing but death ahead of one.” Even though at this stage he could not envision anything after death but nothingness, he was strongly tempted

(according to his [\*My Confession\*](#)) to end his own life.

Looking at Tolstoy just from the outside, this anguish seems strange indeed. He was the owner of a large, magnificent estate. *Anna Karenina*, which he was then writing and sharing with readers in a monthly journal, was a success, and he had achieved all the fame one could reasonably desire. Despite the deaths of a few of his children—not an uncommon phenomenon in large nineteenth-century Russian families—he and his wife Sonia still had three boys and two girls, all healthy. Sonia, who was sixteen years younger than Tolstoy, was a capable and

devoted wife and mother, and he himself was in good physical condition. But, he thought, what good was any of this when one realized that sooner or later the “dragon of death” awaited everyone. “So what” was the response that came from deep within him whenever he thought of his accomplishments, “why?” or “for what reason?” whenever he contemplated a new activity. Life had become meaningless for him. He looked to past wise men like the Bible’s Solomon, but found no comfort.

Tolstoy lived before the term “midlife crisis” (or “middle-aged crisis”) existed, but his crisis evidenced many of the signs

of it. In *Brad's Status* so does Brad's. (See [here](#) and [here](#) for popular explanations of such a crisis.) Brad is dissatisfied with his life. He feels that he has not accomplished much—he directs his own small non-profit company. He worries that he and his wife Melanie (Jenna Fischer) have not saved enough money. He thinks their sex life is not zestful enough. He fantasizes about younger women. He looks back nostalgically at his college years, thinking he had great potential, but somehow never realized it.

Most of the film is devoted to a college-exploration and interview trip for his son

Troy (Austin Abrams), which includes several days at Harvard. While there, he meets Ananya (Shazi Raja), an idealistic student who is writing her thesis on “the history of white missionary women. . . the wives who went to India and Sri Lanka to, you know, like, ‘convert the heathens,’ but, really, they laid down a lot of groundwork for social reform.” (All quotes are taken from the [film script](#), and Harvard students, as in John Kennedy’s day, still write a senior thesis.) Brad also meets Maya (Luisa Lee), a friend of Ananya’s who, like her, is also a gifted musician.

These are the two women Brad fantasizes about. “Her friend Maya was equally captivating, equally compelling. I suddenly felt a deep grief . . . for all the women I would never love . . . and all the lives I would never live. I imagined running away with them both [we see the three of them frolicking on a beach] and starting again.”

Ananya asks Brad for advice. He tells her to "forget nonprofits . . . . Just go make a lot of money. . . . If you want to make an impact in the world and have respect, go be Bill Gates. Go make a lot of money, and then you can do whatever you want with it. . . . Look, I go to a dinner party

and I tell people what I do for a living, and for about three minutes, they act like they admire me and they're interested, and then, uh, after three minutes, I'm invisible. They do not admire me."

Brad's response reminds one of a joke quoted in Stephen Pinker's *The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*. As Pinker relates it, "a dean is presiding over a faculty meeting when a genie appears and offers him one of three wishes—money, fame, or wisdom. The dean replies, 'That's easy. I'm a scholar. I've devoted my life to understanding. Of course, I'll take wisdom.' The genie waves his hand and vanishes in a puff of



smoke. The smoke clears to reveal the dean with his head in his hands, lost in thought. A minute elapses. Ten minutes. Fifteen. Finally a professor calls out, ‘Well? Well?’ The dean mutters, ‘I should have taken the money.’”

Brad’s advice is triggered primarily by his comparing his success (or lack thereof) to that of four of his college friends. Early in the film, he relates: “Nick Pascale was a big movie director in Hollywood, living this crazy, decadent life. Jason Hatfield had his own hedge fund. Obscenely rich. Owns three houses. Big philanthropist. Billy Wearsalter sold his tech company at 40. He’s already retired, living a life of

leisure in Maui. Craig Fisher worked for the White House. He's written all these best-sellers. Always on TV. It's stupid to compare lives. But when I do, I feel somehow I failed. And over time, these feelings get worse.”

As Pinker also notes in his *Case for Reason* and Elizabeth Kolbert in an essay on [“The Psychology of Inequality,”](#) people’s happiness is strongly affected by measuring themselves against their neighbors. As Kolbert quotes one expert, “Status is always a moving target, because it is defined by ongoing comparisons to others.”

This habit of comparing ourselves to others, however, can be a bad one. And not just for the middle-aged. Not long ago, I had a conversation with a mother who was concerned with some of the bad habits of her teenaged daughter's friends and the effect they might have on her daughter. We all know that peer pressure on teenagers can be intense and that it can be difficult to resist it.

My response to the mother was that we should all—teenagers and adults of all ages—live based on our own inner core values and not according to the way others think we should conduct ourselves. Eight years ago, in some [unsolicited](#)

[advice to college students](#), I elaborated on this point and quoted from a 1977 book, [A Guide for the Perplexed](#), by economist and environmentalist E. F. Schumacher. In it he mentioned the difficulties he faced trying to discover how best to live. His education provided little help.

[https://www.academia.edu/36369058/\\_Brads\\_Status\\_Reflections\\_on\\_How\\_We\\_Live\\_Our\\_Lives](https://www.academia.edu/36369058/_Brads_Status_Reflections_on_How_We_Live_Our_Lives)

I also mentioned an essay, [“The Centrality of Wisdom,”](#) by Copthorne Macdonald, founder and former editor of The Wisdom Page. In it he wrote that “values are at the heart of the matter,” and he recommended “wisdom-associated values such as empathy, truth, honesty,

justice, cooperation, peace, compassion, universal well-being, creativity, and comprehensive knowledge.”

Both Schumacher and Macdonald believed that the great religions and what Macdonald and others labeled the “perennial philosophy” can help us become wiser—that philosophy “recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds,” but is “open-minded, flexible, and receptive.” Pinker, however, is skeptical regarding the value of religions.

Moreover, despite some isolated attempts to teach wisdom to youth, it is little

valued in our society. We have more ways of communicating than ever. We have smart phones, Siri, Alexa, Snapchat, Twitter, and Instagram. But what Zbigniew

Brzezinski [https://www.academia.edu/36369058/\\_Brads\\_Status\\_Reflections\\_on\\_How\\_We\\_Live\\_Our\\_Lives](https://www.academia.edu/36369058/_Brads_Status_Reflections_on_How_We_Live_Our_Lives)ski, former National Security Adviser to U. S. President Jimmy Carter, wrote in 1993 and U. S. humorist Dave Barry [once said](#) about television also applies to some extent to other new media that captures so much of today's youth's attention. Brzezinski thought that television had "become prominent in shaping the [U. S.] national culture and its basic beliefs," that it "had a particularly

important effect in disrupting generational continuity in the transfer of traditions and values,” and that it helped produce “a mass culture, driven by profiteers who exploit the hunger for vulgarity, pornography, and even barbarism.” Barry stated that “television's message has always been that the need for truth, wisdom and world peace pales by comparison with the need for a toothpaste that offers whiter teeth and fresher breath.”

Pinker is correct that there are more opportunities, more choices, and more leisure for the world's people than ever before. But if we do not use these

opportunities wisely, what good will they do us? As General Omar Bradley once said: "Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. If we continue to develop our technology without wisdom or prudence, our servant may prove to be our executioner."

In 1950, [\*The Lonely Crowd\*](#) by David Riesman and others appeared. In this book the authors made the distinction between "Inner-Directed" and "Outer-Directed" lives. Brad's problem in *Brad's Status* is that his inner values are not strong enough to resist outer forces. Despite all of the fine qualities of the film, including ample humor, Brad has



never developed the wisdom, the bulwark of values, which will enable him to resist the comparison temptation.

His temptation reminds us of that [faced by Jesus in the Bible](#)—“Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan!” Brad is tempted by the splendors of wealth and fame, which he believes his four college friends have obtained but he has not. What he needs is a fortress constructed of wisdom values that will enable him to overcome any

appeal to less noble goals. Where and how he obtains these values (from religious or secular sources) is up to him, but like the rest of us, he profoundly needs them if he ever hopes to flourish in the best sense of the word.

[Reformatted for ebook readers by  
Wergosum, 20180505]