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Small Comforts: Essays at Middle Age
Jeffrey Hammond
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"The cloud of midlife unknowing," Hammond writes, "brings sublime compensation in the freedom to be oneself. This is why it is so important to know who that self really is. Aging grants us license for just the sort of goofiness and eccentricity that can flourish once we no longer need to impress or control anybody…"

With wry humor and penetrating comment, Hammond, a liberal arts professor, takes us through the discovery of who "that self" really is—how it developed in a Midwestern Protestant all-American boy, and how it fits together as he works his way through midlife. He recounts early dreams of wandering through vast mansions in search of a "room of my own" and records escaping into self-explored Egyptology. The "nonbonding type," he avoids becoming a Boy Scout but has a brief flirtation with the Indian Guides; he is perplexed about the ranking of God and the Great Spirit.

Hammond cheerfully laments what he perceives as the marginality of what he teaches to his students' lives and interests: "Can a middle-aged guy teach Milton again and not slip deeper into the Hades of the un-hip?" The off-beat quip is his métier. Of the eleven essays, perhaps the most engaging is Hammond's count of remaining obdurately on the sidelines as New Years, and the New Millennium, roll by with their changing modes of obligatory celebration. Hammond is his own man—and has much to teach us.