I turn 40 this month, and let's just say I'm not looking forward to this new juncture, which promises to bring everything from aching joints to more wrinkles to further bouts of forgetfulness.

I've been told that at 40, I can no longer wear the sorts of styles my daughter does. It's just too weird. Acting impulsively doesn't fly either — people are quick to tell you to "act your age."

So what do I have to look forward to? Wisdom.

If there's one cliche we've all heard, it's that older people are wiser. But what is wisdom?

"Most of the research defines it as an expertise in solving problems of everyday life," says Laura Carstensen, professor of psychology and founding director of Stanford University's Center on Longevity. "But a lot of people also think wisdom has to do with emotion, how you regulate yourself and how you pass on information to others in a way they can appreciate it."

Stephen S. Hall has just written a book devoted entirely to the subject: "Wisdom: From Philosophy to Neuroscience."

He says decision-making based on the knowledge of what's important lies at the heart of wisdom, which is not necessarily the same thing as intelligence, but speaks to maturity and experience. Hall cites one researcher who has shown that what we lose in cognitive abilities as we get older, we gain in social knowledge and emotional judgment, which leads to better problem-solving skills.
Scientific research and cultural traditions like the Bible and Greek philosophy, Hall says, also identify the following key components of wisdom:

Patience, or the ability to put off instant gratification for something with larger dividends down the road.

Humility.

Resilience, or the ability to cope with adversity and "reset your emotional thermostat quickly."

A "clear-eyed, dispassionate view of human nature and the human predicament."

Altruism, sacrificing one's own interests for the interest of others, for the larger good.

And this biggie — compassion.

"Compassion has always been a centerpiece in the qualities of what defines wisdom," Hall said. "Gandhi had a deep strain of compassion toward his enemies, and the same with Jesus Christ. It's a quality we associate with wise behavior and the exemplaries of wisdom. These are people most of us agree rose above the pettiness that we see in certain people, and they were able to do that because they had a sense of what was really important and how to get to that point."

Researchers say, however, that age doesn't always promise wisdom (there are foolish folks in their 60s and 70s), and that being young doesn't exclude one from acquiring it. Exposure to adversity early in life can produce wisdom in young people, says Hall, citing in his book several great philosophers who suffered childhood trauma and came from single-parent families.

As working definitions go, I think we all have our own takes on wisdom. For me, it's not just the ability to make the right decision, but it's also the ability to offer sage advice to others, to curb my own tongue when I'd rather lash out, and to be brave enough to make life-altering changes when something isn't working.

While I'm not expecting the "wisdom" knob to turn the day I wake up to 40, I guess it's something that I can aspire to as youth fades. At the very least, this will be a time to reflect and take stock of life's high points and disappointments.

At 20, I was in college, a pre-med student with high-flying dreams of adventure and changing the world. Know that feeling?

At 30, the medical school thing hadn't worked out. I was now working as a journalist with dreams of changing the world and finding adventure, all while raising a child. I kicked off that decade of adventure by skydiving on my 30th birthday. I'd later find myself dodging explosive devices in Afghanistan and trekking through militant territory in Pakistan.

At 40, not sure what I'll do to celebrate this milestone, but guessing I won't be jumping out of a
plane this time around. Must be the wisdom thing settling in.

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