

The Mid-life Journey

by

Jackie Yap

**A Special Interest Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the
Spiritual Directors' Formation Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries**

In the BBC Radio 4 program, 'In Defence of Mid-Life Crisis', psychotherapist Philippa Perry said that we are "meaning making creatures; we make a meaning and it fits for a while; when it ceases to fit and what we believe does not match up to our experience; that's what constitutes a crisis; what you believe about yourself isn't being reflected back by the world so you've got to re-imagine who you are."¹

The label "crisis" may be misleading. The Oxford dictionary defines it as "a time of intense difficulty or danger"² whereas the Chinese equivalent 危机 means danger and opportunity.³ Joyce Rupp reframes the mid-life journey as a "summons to grow and a challenge to change."⁴

When we change, we may move from one state to another and become different. We may have left one point and not yet landed on the next. This 'in-between' phase can have a profound impact on us.

Carl Jung used 'morning' and 'noon' to describe the two states: "one belonging to life's morning and formed in response to the people, events and institutions of our environment; the other (noon), the result of meeting with our inner world, an encounter with the previously unconscious, in the second half of life."⁵ The mid-life journey is a movement towards the interior life.

Richard Rohr explained that "in the first half of life, we build a strong container or identity and in the second half, we find the contents that the container was meant to hold".⁶ The first half of life is about gaining success and the development of our ego. The second half is about finding significance and a coming of age for our true self. In mid-life, "the Self becomes the centre, in place of the all-important ego and a new standpoint and attitude arises in the person with accompanying new values"⁷ (listed in the table below).

First half of life	Second half of life
Ego	Self
Conscious personality	Unconscious personality
Outer events	Inner events
Outer environment	Inner environment
Achievements	Integration
Doing	Being

Mid-life transitions may take a few months or years and can typically occur between the ages of thirty five to sixty, though some may never realize it or take up the challenge to cross over. They may be held back by fear, a refusal to accept the truth, impatience or an unwillingness to let go and not be in control for a while.⁸

¹ BBC radio 4 program 'In Defence of Mid Life Crisis' broadcasted on 20 August 2016. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07pd34f>

² Oxford Dictionary. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/crisis>

³ D'Apice, Mary. Noon to Nightfall: A Journey through Midlife and Ageing. Collins Dove, 1989, pg 39

⁴ Rupp, Joyce. Dear Heart Come Home: the Path of Midlife Spirituality. Crossroad Publishing, 1996, pg 15

⁵ D'Apice, Mary. Noon to Nightfall: A Journey through Midlife and Ageing. Collins Dove, 1989, pg 14

⁶ Rohr, Richard. Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life. Jossey Bass, 2011 (ebook), Introduction.

⁷ Brewi, Janice and Anne Brennan. Mid-life Spirituality and Jungian Archetypes. Nicholas-Hays, 1999, pg 58.

⁸ Rupp, Joyce. Dear Heart Come Home: the Path of Midlife Spirituality. Crossroad Publishing, 1996, pg 32.

This journey is not based on 'chronos' or sequential time; instead, it follows 'kairos' time, a season of indeterminate time in which a significant event happens.⁹ Mid-life transitions could start with feelings such as "lethargy, apathy, monotony, indifference, impotence, frigidity, uncertainty, listlessness, dawdling over tasks, loss of interest in things that were once of vital concern, going through the motions, boredom" or "regret, anger, self-doubt, doubt about all relationships and commitments, religious doubt, anxiety, threat; feeling imprisoned, trapped, desperate, hopeless, tortured, hemmed in, restless, dissatisfied, morose, melancholy, nauseated, despairing, fearful"¹⁰ (Appendix A has a list of questions on mid-life beginnings).

The change could be predictable, e.g. physical changes such as menopause, an 'empty nest' as grownup children move out of the home, or retirement; or it could be a traumatic event like the death of a loved one, an unexpected illness, a broken relationship, or job loss. Such events can shake us from our established life patterns and self concept. How we navigate through this seismic shift will affect the quality of the second half of our lives. Mary D'Apice puts it this way -

"The crisis of the limits, as the mid-life transition is often called, puts us in touch with our own limitedness, apparent failures, and the seeming worthlessness of life. It plunges one into a darkness of the chrysalis, a place of disintegration that will provide the substance for new life."¹¹

A common response is to dismiss or suppress our feelings and busy ourselves with activities and achievements. However, we would miss the opportunity to discover this new life and see the "valley of Achor become a door of hope" (Hosea 2:15, New International Version). Brewi and Brennan cite the road to Emmaus story as an example of such a transformation.

"In the course of this journey the disciples move from despair, disorientation, and alienation to hope, wisdom, and a new beginning ... Mid-life is going to be an invitation to a whole new way of seeing and believing."¹²

It is an invitation to look at our identity (who we are), intimacy (who we are with or our relationships), generativity (what we are good for or how we can give life) as well as integrity (what gives our life meaning).¹³

Identity

In the invitation of identity, we would ask ourselves if we are defined by what we do through our role or work, or by who we are made in the image and likeness of God. We may look at our achievements, responsibilities, obligations and desires and feel like there is something is missing. We may have to remove the masks which we show to others and be vulnerable to get at the real us.

⁹ Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kairos>

¹⁰ Brewi, Janice and Anne Brennan. *Mid-life Spirituality and Spiritual Perspective*. Nicholas-Hays, 2004, pg 35 and pg 39.

¹¹ D'Apice, Mary. *Noon to Nightfall: A Journey through Midlife and Ageing*, Collins Dove, 1989, pg 44

¹² Brewi, Janice and Anne Brennan. *Mid-life Spirituality and Jungian Archetypes*. Nicholas-Hays, 1999, pg 209 and pg 211.

¹³ Cenacle Mission of Singapore. *A Spirituality for the Second Half of Life – Part 1: Midlife Transition retreat* by Sr Linda Lizada, 26-26 August 2016.

We may ask ourselves questions like - Where am I? How am I? What dissatisfies me? What do I find myself enjoying? What am I questioning? What do I dream about? What are my fears?

“This beckoning to wholeness, the discovery and acceptance of the missing pieces within one’s self, is the process which Carl Jung calls ‘individuation.’ It involves not only going deeper and reclaiming the lost or unknown pieces of ourselves (the Shadow) but also accepting the dying that goes with this discovery. Our ego, that part of us that is conscious and thinks it knows everything, has to either relinquish some of its supposed truth (its illusions), or to give way to a much larger picture of what truth is.”¹⁴

Carl Jung defines ‘shadow’ as “the negative side of the personality, the sum of all those unpleasant qualities we like to hide, together with the insufficiently developed functions and the contents of the personal unconscious”.¹⁵

Meeting our shadow self is part of the mid-life journey. The encounter can be a difficult one but we need to befriend it so that we can become more whole and grow our capacity to love. It means that we do not deny our negative traits or treat them like an enemy to be cast out; instead it is to accept them as part of ourselves.¹⁶ It is acknowledging that we are ‘mixed up’ and that we have both ‘wheat and weed in our field’ (Matthew 13:24-30, English Standard Version).

We can discover our shadow in a few ways - by “(1) soliciting feedback from others as to how they perceive us, (2) uncovering the content of our projections, (3) examining our slips of tongue and behavior and investigating what is really occurring when we are perceived other than we intended to be perceived, (4) considering our humor and our identifications, and (5) studying our dreams, daydreams and fantasies.”¹⁷

One way to embrace our shadow is to acknowledge our negative emotions when they arise and ask them ‘Who are you?’ (the response could be ‘anger’ or ‘jealousy’ or ‘fear’, etc.), followed by ‘What do you need?’ (the reply could be ‘justice’ or ‘fairness’ or ‘assurance’). This will help us be more aware of what is going on inside and bring our feelings and needs to the Comforter and Giver of all good gifts.

In the first half of life, we often act out of our personality preferences. In the second half, we may need to move to the opposite and discover the other part of ourselves which is dormant. William Miller says that this will result in a new self which is neither the old self nor its opposite; rather it is “the offspring of the union of the two.”¹⁸

Intimacy

The second invitation is to intimacy, when we look at whom we are with and the quality of our relationships. Quality of relationships can be defined as the capacity and freedom to

¹⁴ Rupp, Joyce. Dear Heart Come Home: the Path of Midlife Spirituality. Crossroad Publishing, 1996, pg 32-33.

¹⁵ Jung, Carl Gustav. Two Essays on Analytical Psychology. London, 1953, paragraph 66.

¹⁶ D’Apice, Mary. Noon to Nightfall: A Journey through Midlife and Ageing. Collins Dove, 1989, pg 53.

¹⁷ Miller, William. Your Golden Shadow: Discovering and Fulfilling Your Undeveloped Self. Harper and Row, 1989, pg 52.

¹⁸ Miller, William. Your Golden Shadow: Discovering and Fulfilling Your Undeveloped Self. Harper and Row, 1989, pg 139.

engage in mutual self disclosure and shared vulnerability. If we were to draw three concentric circles, our relationships would fall into the innermost core, i.e. those who really know us and whom we know well, close friends and casual acquaintances.

In mid-life, we may ask ourselves ‘Who is nourishing me?’ and ‘Who am I nourishing?’ We may begin to make new friends and let go of previous ones. As we look at our identity and acknowledge that we are who we are, we can begin to offer the hospitality of the heart and allow others to be who they are with us and live in healthy interdependence.¹⁹

Our intimacy with God may also change. Old ways of praying may become dry and stale. We may need to learn new ways of relating to God and expand our image of who we think God is. The God who is a Mystery, who is silent and dwells in the dark, may be new images that we would be invited to embrace.

Generativity

The third invitation is to generativity or the transmission of life. Do we see ourselves as creative sources of life and energy? Are the things that we are doing important? Do they come out of who we are? Daniel Levinson wrote that “the meaning of legacy deepens and the task of building a legacy acquires its greatest developmental significance” in midlife.²⁰ Generativity arises from “an increased awareness of one’s own mortality and a heightened sense of how one is united or bonded with all that exists.”²¹

We may begin to coach and mentor others to help them fulfill their potential or extend help to those in need. We may be drawn to what gives us a great sense of fulfillment or try out things which we have never done before. Joyce Rupp calls this a birthing of our Isaacs or new beginnings -

“Our Isaacs are varied and many: mended or newly discovered relationships, old dreams dusted off and brought to life, creativity that we never believed in before, a view of ourselves that is both beautiful and bountiful, a spiritual path that energizes us, a work that never seemed possible.”²²

In her book "The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up", Marie Kondo advocates that when we de-clutter our home, we should keep what gives us a spark of joy.²³ Mid-life is about finding our sparks of joy and attending to them.

Integrity

The fourth invitation is to integrity, when our public and private selves are in congruence and when we are not afraid to show others who we are or take an unpopular stand. We may ask ourselves - ‘For whom and for what am I living?’, ‘What is it that I still believe in?’, ‘What is it that without which I cannot live?’, ‘What am I willing to die for?’ and ‘What am I willing to live for?’

¹⁹ Cenacle Mission of Singapore. A Spirituality for the Second Half of Life – Part 1: Midlife Transition retreat by Sr Linda Lizada, 26-26 August 2016.

²⁰ Levinson, Daniel. Seasons of a Man’s Life. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1978, pg 221 (quoted by Joyce Rupp in Dear Heart Come Home, pg 146).

²¹ Rupp, Joyce. Dear Heart Come Home: the Path of Midlife Spirituality. Crossroad Publishing, 1996, pg 150-151.

²² Rupp, Joyce. Dear Heart Come Home: the Path of Midlife Spirituality. Crossroad Publishing, 1996, pg 149.

²³ Kondo, Marie. The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up, Google talk, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1-HMMX_NR8

It is helpful to take a sabbatical or make a retreat during the mid-life transition and have the time and space to reflect and re-assess our lives and discern what we should keep and what we should let go. We may have to deal with unfinished business of the past, e.g. people whom we need to forgive or we ourselves having to receive forgiveness, or revisit past misfortunes and repair them in the present. We may need to look at our dreams - Which of them have come true? Which of them do we see as unrealistic? Which were ours and which were others'? Which dreams did we put on hold? Are there dreams that still hold energy for us? Are there broken dreams that we need to let go of so that we have room for a future vision?²⁴

There are also some things which we can take with us on the mid-life journey. Sr. Linda Lizada suggests three 'bones' - the backbone, which is a decisiveness to make choices; the wish bone, which is the capacity to imagine and be creative; and the funny bone or a sense of humor.²⁵

This creative and playful side of ourselves is the Child within us. It can show us how to recapture the fullness of life and find our way back to wonder.²⁶ The Child is open to exploration and experimentation; it is present in the moment and takes long, loving looks at what is.²⁷ To let our Child lead, we have to let go of our ego concerns; this is not to say that we go back to our 'childish ways' but that we become 'childlike' and journey with humility, authenticity, gratitude and hope.

It is also very helpful to travel with a spiritual director or guide, someone who can hold us in secure parameters. Margaret Guenther describes such a guide as a midwife who helps to bring new life into being.

The midwife is present to another in a time of vulnerability, working in areas that are deep and intimate. It is a relationship of trust and mutual respect ... the midwife is also a teacher, in that she helps the birthgiver toward ever greater self knowledge ... (and) sees clearly what the birthgiver cannot see. She knows the transition period – a time of desolation, of seemingly unmanageable pain and nausea – to be a sign of breakthrough and great progress. She can encourage and interpret when the birthgiver feels she has lost control and failed. She knows when the birthgiver should push, when she should hold back ... the mother's body should know this instinctively but fear and pain may cause her to forget."²⁸

A spiritual guide would offer the gift of attentive and non-judgmental listening and ask the right questions that would allow the mid-lifer to stretch and grow as well as develop his/her own powers of discernment.²⁹ The guide can also hold out the gift of hope in the belief that God is at work even though there seems to be no evidence of it yet. Eugene Peterson describes it this way –

²⁴ Cenacle Mission of Singapore. A Spirituality for the Second Half of Life – Part 1: Midlife Transition retreat by Sr Linda Lizada, 26-26 August 2016.

²⁵ Cenacle Mission of Singapore. A Spirituality for the Second Half of Life – Part 1: Midlife Transition retreat by Sr Linda Lizada, 26-26 August 2016.

²⁶ Brewi, Janice and Anne Brennan. Mid-life Spirituality and Jungian Archetypes. Nicholas-Hays, 1999, pg 160.

²⁷ Burghardt, Walter J. Seasons That Laugh or Weep. Paulist Press, 1983 (quoted by Janice Brewi and Anne Brennan in Mid-life Spirituality and Jungian Archetypes, pg 166).

²⁸ Guenther, Margaret, Holy Listening: the Art of Spiritual Direction. Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1992, pg 87-88.

²⁹ Guenther, Margaret, Holy Listening: the Art of Spiritual Direction. Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1992, pg 65 & 45.

“When I engage in conversation ...I am coming in on something that has already been in process for a long time. God has been and is the central reality in that process. The biblical conviction is that God is ‘long beforehand with my soul.’ God has already taken the initiative.”³⁰

A spiritual guide can also help a mid-lifer hear the beckoning invitations to identity, intimacy, generativity and integrity, see the potential that they unlock and be a sounding board. They can be an encourager, especially when the journey gets slow and uncertain and point to wisdom literature and fellow sojourners who have insights from their own mid-life transitions such as Sue Monk Kidd in her book “When the Heart Waits: Spiritual Direction for Life’s Sacred Questions.”

The mid-life journey may not be easy but it is a promising one - it can be a “new awakening to the Spirit within us, and the Spirit surrounding us in whom we live, move and have our being” and the experience can be “nurtured and celebrated”³¹ especially with a spiritual guide.

³⁰ Peterson, Eugene H. *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1989, pg 61.

³¹ Brewi, Janice and Anne Brennan. *Mid-life Spirituality and Jungian Archetypes*. Nicholas-Hays, 1999, pg x (introduction).

Appendix A

These questions are based on an article written by James Zullo in Human Development, entitled "The Crisis of Limits: Midlife Beginnings", Volume 3 #1, Spring 1982, pages 6-14.³²

They can be used for personal reflection or by spiritual directors to consider and select from in their work with some directees. The questions should be used with care as there may be factors other than mid-life transition that affect these issues. For example, physical changes could be due to an illness or emotional and psychological changes could result from non-mid-life related challenges.

Have you become more recently aware of body changes? For example:

- A shift in your body weight
- Growing loss of muscular firmness and flexibility
- Noticeable general decline in energy level, physical powers
- More headaches or backaches
- Occasional bouts of dizziness and/or insomnia
- Some decline in vision or hearing acuity
- Alternation of chilly sensations with sweating spells
- Tendency to overeat and under exercise
- Increased frequency in experiencing fatigue
- Marked changes in sexual drive

More recently, have you had serious personal injuries, unexpected surgery or illness, which have affected your image of yourself in relation to health?

Are you becoming preoccupied with the passage of time, concerned perhaps with the time you have left, and how you want to use that remaining time?

Do you experience an increasing desire to take stock of your life? Have you become more aware of some unresolved issues of the past coming up, more than usual, perhaps affecting you in ways you have not encountered previously?

Are you aware of strong feelings surfacing at present and which you feel yourself attaching to images and memories of the past?

Do you find yourself remembering painful memories, and realizing their effects on you at the present time? Any unresolved conflicts and unhealed experiences which seem to upset your sense of self at the present time?

Have you become more recently aware of certain emotional and psychological changes in yourself? For example:

- Some depression

³² Cenacle Mission of Singapore. A Spirituality for the Second Half of Life – Part 1: Midlife Transition retreat by Sr Linda Lizada, 26-26 August 2016.

- Tendency to cry for no apparent reason
- Increasing tendency to be distracted
- Inability to focus time and energy
- Increasing irritability, uncharacteristic temper flare-ups, angry outbursts
- Free-floating anxiety with feelings of rootlessness and lack of direction
- Withdrawal or anti-social behavior
- Frantic overwork and frenzy of activity
- Increasing dependence on alcohol, stimulants or sedatives
- Irrational fears about the future, particularly of death

Do you notice any shifts in your faith perspectives, which affect your sense of yourself as a believing, “religious” person? For example:

- Changing images of God and styles of prayer which previously sustained and nurtured you
- Long held religious beliefs and practices being challenged and breaking down
- Search for meaningful faith expression but which appear elusive
- Experience of God being distant and silent
- Boredom and restlessness in prayer/faith life, with feelings of emptiness and senselessness

Are you experiencing occupational/ministerial restlessness? For example:

- Do you wonder whether you have stretched yourself enough in what you have done or accomplished?
- Do you feel that you are not challenged enough in your capabilities?
- Even if you are an effective person, is work significantly meaningful for you?
- Does what you do reflect your deeper values?
- Do you want to continue the work that you’re doing for the next 10-15 years?
- Are you looking for a change, but don’t quite know what?
- In what ways are you experiencing dissatisfaction in what you are doing?

Do you experience boredom in work/ministry? Or a sense of feeling trapped in what you are doing, resulting in discouragement or stagnation? Do you have a feeling that you have outgrown what you are doing? Do you feel that your creativity is drying up?

When you find yourself reflecting in your work/ministry, are you driven to overwork and frantic activity, resulting on work alcoholism? Do you tend to feel good about yourself only if you are involved in your work/ministry, and are therefore afraid to reassess the meaning of work in your life, and address some necessary changes?

Are you experiencing changes in your body which affect you as a sexual person, for example, in your sexual longing or relating?

Do you feel a sense of isolation from friends whose company you used to enjoy and find sufficient?

Are you beginning to assess your relational life by realistically looking at the network of relationships you have, or do not have?

Who have been your significant relationships, and how are you experiencing them now?

Do you find yourself recalling relationships that you failed to nurture, or have experienced as painful, or wasted?

How are you experiencing loneliness at this time? How do you regard being alone?

Do you find yourself desiring to share with trusted friends, learning appropriate expressions and ways of nurturing friendships, learning to trust and be vulnerable?

Do you experience an increasing sense of self-confidence and/or pervading self-doubt, to an extent that you never did before, and seem unable to handle?

BIBLIOGRAPHY ✓

BBC radio 4 program 'In Defence of Mid Life Crisis' broadcasted on 20 August 2016.
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07pd34f>.

Brewi, Janice and Anne Brennan. *Mid-life Spirituality and Jungian Archetypes*. Nicholas-Hays, 1999.

Brewi, Janice and Anne Brennan. *Mid-life Spirituality and Spiritual Perspective*. Nicholas-Hays, 2004.

Burghardt, Walter J. *Seasons That Laugh or Weep*. Paulist Press, 1983.

Cenacle Mission of Singapore. *A Spirituality for the Second Half of Life – Part 1: Midlife Transition retreat* by Sr Linda Lizada, 26-26 August 2016.

D'Apice, Mary. *Noon to Nightfall: A Journey through Midlife and Ageing*. Collins Dove, 1989.

Guenther, Margaret, *Holy Listening: the Art of Spiritual Direction*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1992.

Jung, Carl Gustav. *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*. London, 1953, paragraph 66.

Kidd, Sue Monk. *When the Heart Waits: Spiritual Direction for Life's Sacred Questions*. HarperOne, 1990.

Kondo, Marie. *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, Google talk.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1-HMMX_NR8.

Levinson, Daniel. *Seasons of a Man's Life*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1978.

Miller, William. *Your Golden Shadow: Discovering and Fulfilling Your Undeveloped Self*. Harper and Row, 1989.

Peterson, Eugene H. *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1989.

Rupp, Joyce. *Dear Heart Come Home: the Path of Midlife Spirituality*. Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996.

Rohr, Richard. *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. Jossey Bass, 2011.

Zullo, James. "The Crisis of Limits: Midlife Beginnings", *Human Development*, Volume 3 #1, Spring 1982.