

The Emerging Recognition of the Shadow

by

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The Mid-life Journey

Mid-life spirituality is a new awakening - in the middle of our lives – “to the Spirit within us, and the Spirit surrounding us in whom we live and move and have our being”.¹ The mid-life experience is a phenomenon that produces itself – it chooses us, although it can be couched in some outer or inner life event, eg empty nest, grandchildren, retirement.² Jung saw the mid-life transition as the most important moment in adult development.³

The mid-life calls for a change in orientation from the conscious personality (ego) [the person we think we are] to the *larger* unconscious personality (Self/Shadow/True Self) of which we have been unaware.

Where there has been failure to work through previous conflicts and challenges, those difficulties can be stored up interiorly and can lead to defensive survival strategies that tie up a person’s energy. We could be concerned by what we are encountering and seek help in making sense of our present experience.⁴

We are summoned to the inner journey and to the venture of integrating the conscious and the unconscious elements of the personality. We may find the ‘maps’ we have used thus far no longer seem to work. We can experience discontent. It is important to give time to this journey in reflection, prayer, journal writing and intimate conversation with a friend, spiritual guide or helper.⁵

In this increased sense of interiority at mid-life⁶ there is a growing emphasis on introspection and stock-taking. Jung called this process ‘individuation’ and suggested four polarities:⁷

¹ Janice Brewi and Anne Brennan, ‘Mid-Life Spirituality and Jungian Archetypes’, page x

² Ibid page 12

³ Ibid page xi

⁴ Carolyn Gratton, ‘The Art of Spiritual Guidance’, page 54

⁵ Carolyn Gratton, ‘The Art of Spiritual Guidance’, page 19

⁶ Evelyn-Eaton and James D Whitehead, ‘Christian Life Patterns’, page 136

⁷ Ibid page 141 and 142

The shifting balance of young and old	Invitation to adults to rebalance young and old in themselves, letting go of aspects of youthfulness now no longer appropriate - locating the values of maturity and experience in new sense of middle-aged self
Creative and destructive	External events may trigger, ie death, illness of a parent or unresolved anger. Personal aggressiveness previously channelled into career or nurturing family may come to the fore. Forgiving past wrongs and coming to terms with the destructiveness within and without the self. The reconciliation may release inner creativity
Masculine and feminine	Balancing those parts of the personality undeveloped: the feminine within the man – [gentleness or fear] and assertiveness in the woman. Times of interiority may allow the man/woman to go beyond cultural stereotypes
Attachment and separateness	Adult may feel drawn to the inner world of imagination, play and reflection – away from the external environment through family, career, community etc. Refusal to question attachment to busyness may prevent growth in interiority. To flow with the rebalancing clears space to come to a new reconciliation with one’s deepest ambitions and strengths.

James Fowler quotes Levinson who viewed the life cycle as divided into eras of roughly 20 years duration.⁸ He encourages his readers to engage in those tasks bringing new and enriched ways of being in faith.⁹ We dare not cling on to the things of the past which no longer nurture us.

Growth is possible for anyone who is willing to go deeper¹⁰ and the vitality and health of persons in the mature years depends on their success in making a mid-life transition.¹¹

⁸ James W Fowler, ‘Stages of Faith’, page 110

⁹ James W Fowler, ‘Stages of Faith’, page 114

¹⁰ Joyce Rupp, ‘Dear Heart Come Home’, page 158

¹¹ Brewi and Brennan, ‘Mid-life Spirituality and Jungian Archetypes’, page 35

Brewi and Brennan¹² ask the following questions which may be helpful to people approaching/dealing with midlife issues:

- Has s/he recently been more inner orientated?
- Has she made friends with her shadow? [See below]
- Has s/he owned her own story in childhood and youth?
- Has s/he made peace with the past, mourning all that there is to mourn?
- Has s/he forgiven herself for her failures, for her sins against others, and for the evil done to her?
- Has s/he discerned her own inner depths and learned to be present to the inner self?
- Has s/he been baptized by the Holy Spirit and come to know that God is truly pleased with her?
- Is s/he able to rest and know peace even in turmoil?
- Is prayer of quiet contemplation a large part of the day?
- Does s/he look for opportunities to relate to others, to give and to receive?
- Is the spirit more important than the body to her?
- Has s/he related to the child within and developed a spirituality of play?
- Has s/he learned to be poor in spirit?
- Did s/he celebrate mid-life?
- Is s/he celebrating the mature years?

See also Joyce Rupp's 'checklist' [reproduced in the attached Appendix] that may be useful as we examine our own maturing process.¹³

Welch stresses the importance of knowing ourselves. Without acknowledging the unconscious the shadow may eventually become disruptive in our lives.

¹² Ibid page 35

¹³ Joyce Rupp, 'Dear Heart, Come Home', page 158

“Without a conscious entrance into the collective layers of the psyche and a return with a greater consciousness and awareness, the individual receives no nourishment for growth, and the Self remains only a dream.”¹⁴

Mid-life does not have to be a shipwreck however – Juliet Batten talks about her mother finding her vocation in her fifties!¹⁵

What is the shadow?

The shadow is made up of unwanted and/or undeveloped characteristics which could have become part of our consciousness but remain unknown to us or were rejected.¹⁶ Paul says

“The good that I would I do not, but the evil which I would not, that I do.” Romans 7:19

These unknown/undeveloped, repressed, rejected or despised parts of our **inner lives** can produce anxiety, anger, depression and an infinite variety of tensions. They exist when from the point of view of our **outer lives** in the world everything is just fine.¹⁷

These contents can possess us and then we have compulsive and objective acting-out behaviour¹⁸ or we can project these inner conflicts out on other people, which will be discussed below.

Our shadow personality is often obvious to others but unknown to us.¹⁹

Sanford says that the deepest fear of the ego is that it will drown in the unconscious, be overcome and extinguished.²⁰ But the good news is that the inner world as well as the outer world is obedient to God. In Christ, God is realised within as well as in the forces of the world outside.²¹ With faith in this Power of God, one may endure the storm of exposure to the inner world of tension and conflict.

¹⁴ John Welch, ‘Spiritual Pilgrims’, page 126

¹⁵ Juliet Batten, ‘Growing Into Wisdom’, page 8

¹⁶ John A Sanford, ‘The Invisible Partners’, page 9

¹⁷ Morton T Kelsey, ‘Companions on The Inner Way’, page 167

¹⁸ Morton T Kelsey, ‘Companions on The Inner Way’, page 167

¹⁹ Ibid page 9

²⁰ John A Sanford, ‘The Kingdom Within, page 55

²¹ Ibid page 55

In our shadows are hidden all those ideas, feelings and wishes whose expression would have placed in jeopardy our most significant early childhood relationships and we had no choice but to disown those parts of ourselves which threatened our life supporting relationships.²²

Nicola Slee's recent research into faith development in women also talks about another area of alienation in women:

“A number of studies highlight the period of adolescence as a crucial development period when girls experience this loss of self and of voice. The results of this research are helpfully summarised by Maria Harris (1993). Prior to age twelve, suggests Harris, girls speak with confidence and authority about their experiences and expect others to listen to them. Somewhere around age twelve, however, their awareness of society's gendered expectations grows, and so the seeds of a divided self are sown. A terrible choice presents itself to girls at this point, summarised by Harris as follows:

- (a) either to stop or hide one's own voice in order to become, or be thought of, as a 'nice girl', and so become alienated from oneself; or
- (b) to refuse to be silent and take the risk, perceived and real in this society, of becoming alienated socially and politically, of being ostracized as, for example, “brash”, “loud”, “aggressive”, “outspoken”, “bossy”.”²³

How can we locate our shadow?

We all act or think in various ways but we actually *prefer* to act and think in particular ways and over the years have developed certain patterns of behaviour based on these preferences.²⁴ One area, therefore, that is helpful in locating our shadow can be found in the **Myers Briggs Personality Indicator** and our *preferred functions*, ie introversion or extroversion; sensing or intuiting; thinking or feeling; perceiving or judging.

At mid-life what is called for is not just some more development of the less developed functions so that we can adapt in a better way to the outside environment. What is called for is the **recognition** of the undeveloped attitude and functions as the more accessible

²² Janice Brewi and Anne Brennan, 'Mid-Life Spirituality and Jungian Archetypes', page 109

²³ Nicola Slee, 'Women's Faith Development', page 84

²⁴ Malcolm Goldsmith and Martin Wharton, 'Knowing Me Knowing You', page 12

gateway to one's own shadow and one's shadow as the way to one's whole unconscious. This real knowing of the *inferiority* of one's inferior side and the embracing of it are crucial to one's adaptation to the whole inner world of the personal and objective psyche.²⁵ These less preferred functions are normally invisible to others. We tend to keep them subdued and use them less often and are less at ease with them. We try to deny and often hate them because of the discomfort which they cause us. But they are a part of us and in a life of discipleship need to be acknowledged and offered to God as part of the offering of our lives.²⁶

Another area we may be aware of our shadow is in our **projections**:

John Sanford describes projection as

“... a psychic mechanism that occurs whenever a vital aspect of our personality of which we are unaware is activated. When something is projected we see it outside of us, as though it belongs to someone else and has nothing to do with us. Projection is an unconscious mechanism. We do not decide to project something, it happens automatically.”²⁷

The things one cannot admit about oneself are often projected onto others – one finds in others what one hates in oneself, what is denied and unknown about oneself.²⁸

Sanford talks about using our projections as mirrors in which we see the reflection of our own psychic contents.²⁹

Whatever we have ignored that is vital and important to our total personality is seen in others. This ‘projection’ of something in ourselves onto others is done quite unconsciously, which is why we always seem so innocent in our own eyes. The projection of our ‘enemy’ [see below] onto another individual distorts our relationship with that

²⁵ Janice Brewi and Anne Brennan, ‘Mid-Life Spirituality and Jungian Archetypes’, page 143

²⁶ Malcolm Goldsmith and Martin Wharton, ‘Knowing Me Knowing You’, page 166

²⁷ John A Sanford, ‘The Invisible Partners’, page 10

²⁸ Janice Brewi and Anne Brennan, ‘Mid-Life Spirituality and Jungian Archetypes’, page 108

²⁹ John A Sanford, ‘The Invisible Partners’, page 10

person. Unless s/he is aware of what is going on and refuses to wear the projection we force him/her to carry a psychological burden that is most unfair.³⁰

We can recognise our 'projections' and those of our directees where there is overreaction, overkill and excessive emotion. These are sure signs that something unconscious has been touched and is finding expression.³¹

The shadow can also be located in our **dreams**. As mentioned previously, we banish disagreeable things about ourselves and pretend they do not exist. But this does not at all mean they cease to be. They simply are repressed but continue to live in the unconscious like another person.³²

Case Study

Ann talked of overreaction to strong, 'dominating' people. She felt crushed, unheard and that whatever she said carried no weight at all. Her reaction to such people started to follow a repeated pattern of withdrawal and hostility. Over a period of time as Ann journeyed with her spiritual director, clues as to what was happening came in her dreams. Two significant dreams concerned a baby and water. In the first dream another person [female] is bathing the baby. In the second dream [a year later] a happy, playful, toddler is being held by strong [male] hands in water at the seashore.

Sanford talks about our 'inner adversary or enemy' and states that our **real enemy** is our unconsciousness of the mask we are wearing.³³ The 'inner

³⁰ John A Sanford, 'The Kingdom Within', page 84

³¹ Janice Brewi and Anne Brennan, 'Mid-Life Spirituality and Jungian Archetypes', page 85

³² John A Sanford, 'Dreams God's Forgotten Language', page 9

³³ Ibid, page 83

enemy' appears in our dreams as an inferior figure of the same sex as the dreamer.

For Ann the first dream identified a person known to her as 'gentle', bathing the baby in the midst of a chaotic scenario – the person has a peaceful attitude. This 'gentle' female is a glimpse of Ann's true Self or shadow. Other symbols in the dream needed to be looked at and revisited often as they also had implications of an inner shift in Ann which was mirrored in some outer events that were bringing huge turmoil to her life.

Over a period of time as the journey continued Ann came to realise that the emerging 'new personality' – the shadow – is asking to be welcomed into her life, but the ego [conscious personality] is trying to crush it. The challenge after recognising the projection is to stay in a place of vulnerability as the shadow personality is welcomed and given room.

The dreams helped Ann to see that the baby is 'secure'. She is in gentle hands in the first dream and strong hands in the second one. The projection can be lifted from other people as she realises that the struggle is within her 'inner kingdom' and Ann has made a choice to welcome the process of integration with that 'lost' part of herself.

What can we do about the shadow?

In the Gospels the story of Jesus' baptism is immediately followed by the story of the temptations. Could both of these events mark the midpoint of Jesus' life and the archetypal experience of mid-life?³⁴ At his baptism, deep within his own depths Jesus

³⁴ Janice Brewi and Anne Brennan, 'Mid-Life Spirituality and Jungian Archetypes', page 42

hears, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” At the midpoint of our lives each of us needs to be affirmed and know ourselves, that we are good and we are God’s loved one.

Henry Cloud says that our natural tendency is to try and resolve the problem of good and evil by keeping the good and bad separated. This splitting results in an inability to tolerate badness, weakness and failure in ourselves and others.³⁵

How can we face the ‘bad’ in ourselves? How can we be the Good Samaritan to ourselves and show gentleness and compassion? Again quoting Cloud:

“If we adopt a loving and accepting tone toward our real self there is hope for transformation. If we are able to accept the parts of ourselves we do not feel are ideal, then those parts will be loved and healed. They can begin to grow in ways never before imagined. Acceptance is the answer to the dilemma of the ideal versus the real. That is grace.”³⁶

So we need to accept the truth of who we are and as we journey with directees to have that same acceptance towards them as they meet their own shadow/Self on their interior journey. This is no easy task – to befriend that which may be repugnant is not easy³⁷ yet the shadow must be *experienced* to be truly accepted. We cannot merely intellectually acknowledge it – we must feel the repulsiveness of the negative contents. Thankfully the befriending of the shadow is incremental.³⁸

For all of its darkness the shadow seems close to God. It is when we begin to wrestle with our shadow we find ourselves – like Jacob – somehow wrestling with God. Seeing our shadow, the ‘beam that is in our own eye’, is essential to religious experience, the beginning of a confrontation with ourselves and with God.³⁹

³⁵ Henry Cloud, ‘Changes that Heal’, page 170

³⁶ Henry Cloud, ‘Changes that Heal’, page 175

³⁷ John Welch, ‘Spiritual Pilgrims’, page 122

³⁸ David Richo, ‘Shadow Dance’, page 202

³⁹ John A Sanford, ‘Dreams God’s Forgotten Language’, page 108

We have the encouragement from Jung that the shadow is 90% gold and can be transformed into a positive source of energy for the personality but first it must be admitted and accepted as a reality in the psyche.⁴⁰

As we move towards reconciliation and integration in our lives and support that journey in directees we are “mining for gold in the psyche’s dark but inviting caves”⁴¹ and there are benefits to that ‘mining’:

“It is also important to remember that no matter how far we develop spiritually, we retain in ourselves vestiges of the previous stages through which we have come..... I don’t suppose I could be writing this were I not basically a kind of Stage IV person. But I can assure you that there exists a Stage I Scott Peck who, at the first sign of any significant stress, is quite tempted to lie and cheat and steal. I keep him well encaged, I hope, in a rather comfortable cell, so that he won’t be let loose upon the world. (And I am able to do this only because I acknowledge his existence, which is what Jungian psychologists mean by the ‘integration of the shadow’. Indeed I do not attempt to kill him if for no other reason than that I need to go down into the dungeon from time to time and consult him, safely ensconced behind the bars, when I am in need of a particular kind of ‘street smarts’”⁴²

For the spiritual director to journey with a directee into this inner realm is a selfless task. To be the voice that reminds the directee that s/he is accepted by God when there is a temptation to self-rejection is vital.⁴³ The directee may feel ‘like s/he’s going to pieces’ or ‘coming apart’.⁴⁴

We may find as spiritual directors that there is an overlap with areas that we may have regarded as the realm of the therapist and yet is part of the directee dealing with his/her spiritual reality.⁴⁵

We can be attentive to some of the signs mentioned previously, overreactions to people, resistance to the inner movements that could perhaps be the voice of the shadow trying to

⁴⁰ John A Sanford, ‘Dreams God’s Forgotten Language’, page 120

⁴¹ David Richo, ‘Shadow Dance’, page 250

⁴² Scott M Peck, ‘The Different Drum’, page 198

⁴³ Henri Nouwen, ‘Life of the Beloved’, page 28

⁴⁴ Janice Brewi and Anne Brennan, ‘Mid-Life Spirituality and Jungian Archetypes’, page 117

⁴⁵ Morton T Kelsey, ‘Companions on The Inner Way’, page 168

get the directee's attention and yet may be drowned out by busyness or making sure there is no silence in which to 'listen'.

We can keep in mind that problems *with* others may ultimately be problems *within* ourselves. To befriend our shadow is to recover a lost part of ourselves and only in this way can we relate to others as whole persons and be present in relationships.⁴⁶

It is good at this point to keep in focus that we are in partnership with the Spirit of God and that it is God who is working in the directee's life. We are what Margaret Guenther describes as a 'Midwife to the Soul':⁴⁷

“Tend only to the birth in you and you will find all goodness and all consolation, all delight, all being and all truth. Reject it and you reject goodness and blessing. What comes to you in this birth brings with it pure being and blessing. But what you seek or love outside of this birth will come to nothing, no matter what you will or where you will it.” Meister Eckhart⁴⁸

The midwife is:

- Present to another in a time of vulnerability
- Works in areas that are deep and intimate
- Does things *with* not *to* the person giving birth
- Helps birth-giver toward ever greater self-knowledge
- Invites questions and takes time to answer
- Is knowledgeable enough to seek help if necessary
- Sees clearly what the birth-giver cannot see
- Encourages and interprets when the birth-giver feels she has lost control and failed
- Knows how and when to confront
- Is able to give heart like a good coach
- Finally, the midwife rejoices in the baby⁴⁹

⁴⁶ David Richo, 'Shadow Dance, page 187

⁴⁷ Margaret Guenther, 'Holy Listening', page 87

⁴⁸ Margaret Guenther, 'Holy Listening', page 81

⁴⁹ Ibid, page 88

APPENDIX

Taken from Joyce Rupp's 'Dear Heart, Come Home'⁵⁰

As we journey inward during midlife, we may discover:

- That our persona probably has chinks and cracks in it and may need some mending or adapting, or a complete renovation.
- That we can find wisdom in the wounds we've carried from birth onward, and that these wounds can heal.
- That surprises of beauty and talent in us wait to be discovered and shared with the universe.
- That some of what we thought to be unbreakable truth, beliefs, and values is now shattered pottery and unmendable.
- That risk-taking is essential if we are to grow.
- That we are loveable as we are.
- That loneliness need not kill us.
- That we require time and solitude for ourselves.
- That dreams not lived now never will be.
- That we must come to terms with the reality of our mortality and stop pretending that our bodies will never die.
- That the best of who we are has not only survived the bruises and battering of life's storms but has actually taken root and is ready to put out a vivid green shoot of life.
- That many of our efforts to hide in the clutter of busy activity have left a dry, stale taste in our soul and we are crying out to be held in the embrace of simple presence.
- That we have within us the weaknesses we've despised in others.
- That what we saw as our failure was really our teacher.
- That guilt and shame can be kept for only so long before they turn sour.
- That past regrets must be let go lest they cling to us and suck our energy for life like leeches in a farm creek.

⁵⁰ Joyce Rupp, 'Dear Heart, Come Home', page 158

- That the loving part of us can always out-wrestle the hating part of us.
- That our struggle to name God and to find a spirituality that enlivens and enriches our existence is less complex than what we first thought.
- That we can be free as a child to enjoy the wonder of life in a simple, spontaneous splashing of play in the world.

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