

MIDLIFE CRISIS: FACTS, THE BATTLE AND THE SIGNS OF GROWTH

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ABSTRACT

The vocational crisis among priests, brothers and women religious, was not the sudden impact of Vatican II or its receding ripples. That was a phenomenon which was there, prevalent even today, and will continue to occur. As one nears the age of 40 and 50, one may discover that one has lost the power of youth. The perception of change occurring within oneself, begins with a sense of emptiness, loneliness and disenchantment in what one was doing or how one was living. A deep depression, quite common in this period, can lead one to believe that one has made the wrong commitment, which may then to disillusionment in one's goal. A balanced and healthy philosophy with which to view this crisis in midlife, can be provided by mature professionals and spiritual directors who cater to men and women within this transition period. However, immature guides and counselors, unaware of their own hidden needs and their responsibility in respecting boundaries in their helping role as professionals, may misguide their clients rather than help them. The goal of counseling is to help the individual pass through this stage, without making any radical changes as a consequence of the crisis state.

Introduction

We know that all human beings are ordinary people and are not superwomen or supermen. Aspects of our human development, our achievements and also our problems may be seen in the

general population. Human developmental experiences, both positive and negative, including our anxieties, especially those related to loneliness or the lack of personal growth, affect the lives of all persons. The dramatic disintegration of many marriages and the vocational crises of priests, brothers and women religious, is a phenomenon that is prevalent today, and is not a mere scenario of a Post-Vatican II era. A common phenomenon occurring in people in their 40's and 50's is that they decide to forsake their commitment either to marriage or the ordained life. As you read this article, you might find these observations reflecting your own experiences or those of your family, friends and community members. Very often during this time, the picture that emerges is that of a committed person who gave unselfishly and untiringly to the work or ministry during the first half of their life. Self-worth and meaning had been found in the commitment that had been made. Finding oneself at a crossroads precipitates a crisis. The unravelling of this crisis invites us not only to know the facts, the reality of the battle within this crisis, but also to welcome the signs of growth.

Description of a Mid-life Crisis Experience

Though human development has been explored by a host of clinical psychologists, it is Carl G. Jung, a social psychologist, who made great strides in understanding adult development (1875-1961) as a product of both intrapersonal (internal) and interpersonal (external cultural/social) levels. He christened the early childhood stage as the "Morning of Life" (ages 0- 20). Between the ages of 21- 35 and from 35 - 40 he called "the Noon of Life". This period, he said, is the peak time during which a process of "individuation" takes place. Some crucial experiences of crisis and transition, many uncontrolled feelings, the sense of an inability to cope, and also some good learning experiences may occur during this time. The last half of the life cycle Jung identified as the "Afternoon", leading to "Nightfall".

The mid-life transition/crisis period, is an experience that the human person may undergo as they near the age of 40 and 50. It is at this "Noon of Life", that a person may discover that they have lost the power of youth. The perception of change taking place within oneself, begins with a sense of emptiness, loneliness and

disenchantment in what one was doing or in how one was living. One of the common feelings that is commonly experienced during this crisis is dissatisfaction or a sense of worthlessness. This leads the inner self to strive for something more than what one would normally cope with. In a therapeutic situation the person often shares about their struggle as an individual. They invariably articulate that the missing dimension that is needed is “*meaningful relationships*”. When asked to elaborate on how they have tried to cope with this struggle, they usually indicate that they turned to one of their community members or, very often to someone outside the community, who could respond to their need. When the community is unable to cater to this need adequately, the person in crisis often forsakes their commitment because they found a caring friend/partner elsewhere who showed concern about them as a person. At the same time, it is also heartening to note that some who underwent this struggle found very healthy relationships and developed mature identities, while continuing to pursue their goal in their chosen commitment.

One may ask whether such upheaval and confusion around the age 40-50 is normal in the lives of the general population of men and women. Daniel Levinson reports in his book: *The Seasons of a Man's Life*: that a “Midlife Transition”, which focuses on the period of “Adult Development” around the age 40, is a shift from “youth” to “Middle Age”/ mid-life decade extending sometimes up to age 65. The normal biological and psychological changes may still enable an individual to enrich his life. “He can be more free from the petty vanities, animosities, envies and moralisms of early adulthood. This could also result in enhancing the quality of one's love relationships and develop a greater capacity for intimacy as one integrates more fully the “tender feminine aspects” of his self” (Levinson, D.J. 1978).

While most people undergo a mid-life change in style of work and living, mid-life is also a season when other qualities such as wisdom, judiciousness, magnanimity, compassion and breadth of perspective may be displayed. However, Levinson underscores that in the middle adulthood a large number of men will experience a process of gradual stagnation, an alienation from the world and from the self. In one of the studies done in the late 1980s, it was noted that along with the regular symptoms of

“andropause”, priests approaching 50 were experiencing a greater need for intimacy. Almost all women experienced similar symptoms, and “menopause” is inextricably linked with middle age.

The Symptoms of Midlife Battle

The crucial developmental conflict usually borders around a feeling of helplessness, an experience of being caught in a state of emotional upset and the inability to take adequate action to solve the problems independently.

This middle-age period is very often characterized by re-evaluation and reflection, in an attempt to determine where one is going, and to discern what one will do for the remainder of one's life. Murphy, S., in *Midlife Wanderer* (1983,) says: “The Woman Religious in Midlife Transition, undergoes a similar phenomenon occurring around the age 40-45, battling with midlife, shattering one's self-confidence of “holding it together.” It would invariably lead to a feeling of illness or fatigue, and if depicted on a graph would reveal sudden dips, slow rises and long horizontal lines in a representing pattern. Depression looms large causing tears, and while at times leads to sparks of hope, very often plateaus, leaving the person with very little motivation.

On further investigation of the personal lives of certain women religious, a therapist notes that there is a general feeling of loss, (either of one's job, efficiency, or ability to function), a questioning of one's life choices, or a sense of limitedness in decision making and of one's ability to function independently. Midlife then becomes a state of crippling depressive mood - possible in both married and religious life - which becomes a source of extreme frustration.

Mid-life Transition is very often christened as Mid-life Crisis because it poses dangers as well as it offers opportunities. It is a period of danger implying high risk, threatening to leave the person in an overwhelming state of anxiety and stress. It is also a time of opportunity because it presents a challenge to grow and change for the better. It is important to note that Mid-life Crisis is not synonymous with ‘andropause’ in men, and ‘menopause’ in women, although it is closely linked to this age and entails

biological change. Mid-life crisis is a developmental stage in one's life cycle when one has a lot of difficulty meeting the demands of this particular period and finding the life structure of this period almost intolerable. Many individuals develop a lowered sense of self-esteem or depression, and do not develop good methods and mechanisms for coping with such developmental stress.

Responsibilities of Mid-life Battle

One of the major tasks of those experiencing this stage as a crisis, is to face the fact that she/he is no longer young. The physical appearance itself identifies the aging process. A constant feeling of low self-worth, loss of youth and lack of self-confidence can lead to harsh self-judgment and frequent guilt feelings. It is at this time of decreased self-esteem that one needs the understanding and support of a compassionate person who is able to sensitively offer sufficient spiritual and psychological guidance.

Midlife crisis may enable some to regain faith, deal with problems with prayer, handle embarrassing situations, and cope with community or family problems. Married men tend to deny that their sexual response is diminishing, and seek out alliances with younger women. Women in crisis also tend to deny their physical decline and may pursue younger men seeking more satisfactory sexual pleasure. In my experience in guiding those in the midst of midlife battle, some would give in to total depression, or feeling no sense of their own identity. Others yield to over-indulging in alcohol, or to surfing the internet for pornographic websites. A few women religious had even considered suicide, or experienced life as if passing through a dark tunnel of disillusionment.

Ambivalent dynamics in Coping with Midlife Crisis

In surveying through a number of midlife crisis cases, and analysing their psychodynamics, a range of different coping mechanisms may be cited. Some type of personalities head directly for an affair seeking intimacy and friendship. These may result in the person forsaking their original commitment. Others with to a sense of discernment, seek a professional in whom they can confide their hidden anxieties and frustrations, and with whom they can look for viable and healthy alternatives. Such help may challenge the person to a renewal of their commitment, boosting

their self-worth leading to stronger faith, and greater inner freedom. Some were helped by developing a dependable relationship with a compatible person who would remain loyal. The therapist however, safeguards their trust and confidentiality, and would gently challenge them to face the reality, with reasonable objectivity.

Goal and Value- based Growth Orientation

Mature professionals and spiritual directors who cater to both men and women undergoing this transition period, can assist them with the development of a balanced and healthy philosophy of growth orientation. They focus on the person's mid-life period as an opportunity to reassess their past personal life and help them to look to the future with fresh hope. Levinson suggests that they are helped by asking such questions as e.g.

- 1) What have I done with my life/commitment?
- 2) How have I given myself to others or has it been one of mere receiving?
- 3) What do I need to work with greater determination so as to grow with myself and others?
- 4) What have been my inner potentials that I already know of? (make a deliberate note of them)
- 5) Renew the personal ideal/goal, and ask seriously: "What do I want from it now"

These, and similar questions, a married man would consider with regard to his wife, children, and extended family. An ordained person would ask the same questions with regard to the Church, friends, community and the congregation.

With regard to women, it should be noted that the mid-life crisis can begin around the age of 35 or 40. Biological and physical changes sometimes may result in drastic alterations of self-image or a general feeling of lack of self-confidence. For some married women such feelings may affect their spouse, children and work areas, whereas women religious try to pass through the transition centering their attention on leading a mature evangelical life along with a life of prayer, community life and their apostolic work.

Today's women do a lot of travelling, finding new jobs, resuming their education or preferring to enjoy time being alone. Some initiate divorce because they are unhappy, or wanting freedom, or wanting release from their commitment. Some women risk their marriages to pursue what they want, to the astonishment of their partners. Some become highly assertive, or even aggressive along with role reversals. Some women religious show a dissatisfaction in the Church and in their community life. Unhappiness with one's apostolic occupation could result in seeking new positions in the Church or community. A few dare to abandon their vocation to find new ways of fulfilling their personal needs and of serving others.

Change in Sexual Response

A male over 40 or 45 years experiences a decrease in testosterone (male sex hormone) resulting in a decrease in sexual arousal. For married men sexual pleasure may change from a strongly genital sensation to a more sensuously diffuse experience. Research shows that male sexual response gradually starts declining after 40 years. During midlife crisis a married man suffers a loss of masculine self-esteem. Sex becomes more sensuously and feelings oriented, and the man may desire the element of tenderness. At this time a married man may begin to regress by seeking out an affair with another woman, or be satisfied with fantasy or find alternative compensation. A woman, on the other hand, may experience the peak of her sexual experience around the age of 30 and thereafter begin to find the sexual experience routine and boring.

The priest over the age of 40, undergoing a midlife crisis, may become victim of self-questioning, self-doubt and disillusionment. As he discovers that new sexual feelings and emotions need expression, he may seek an attractive, understanding woman who boosts his self-esteem. The woman could be a parishioner or a colleague, and the priest may eventually give up his vocation in order to marry. In my experience of working with priests and religious brothers of this age, it must be emphasised that very often they leave not because of a need for genital sex, but because of the desire for a close, tender relationship. At times it is a mere compensation either to express overly repressed feelings and emotions with someone who admires them and cares for them, or

they feel the need to share their lives with another person in an exclusive way.

In reviewing some of the work done with religious women in therapeutic circles, (mainly with those undergoing midlife transition period), it appears that these women tend to see the grass as greener on the other side. In reality, of course, the grass of the lives of both religious or lay women, has its patches of brown. Some seem to be quite vulnerable to the inner demands for sexual pleasure. If the woman is then in contact with a male co-worker or with a priest as spiritual director, she may become especially sensitive to his emotional needs. Such a relationship, though initially begun at a spiritual level, may develop at the unconscious level into intimate sharing, which may then lead to intimacy on a sexual level. This is the danger with many immature guides and counselors who are unaware of their own hidden needs and responsibilities in respecting boundaries in their helping role as professionals.

Help Needed and the Growth through Counseling

It is imperative that any person undergoing midlife crisis seeks help to develop a more objective view of this transitional period. A counselor should lead the individual to the awareness of what is taking place. The crisis situation, while triggered by unhappiness, a feeling of being unsettled, and being at loose ends, may be rather difficult to attribute to the stage of midlife transition. A counselor's responsibility is to lead the client to some understanding of the nature and dynamics of midlife crisis. The individual should then be helped to link the feelings and emotions of this stage to the years between 35 and 60. They need to be encouraged to resolve, or make a commitment, to heal any unresolved conflicts at the interpersonal level.

The goal of counseling is to help the individual pass through this stage without making any radical changes in life-commitment that are the consequences of the crisis state. The counselor and the client should search for other realistic options that don't disrupt the person's life. This may even help the client to pass through the midlife crisis stage, by enhancing their growth and gradually make the necessary changes. It is essential that the counselor helps the one in need to identify the tunnel vision of a romantic love,

which by nature sees in the other only subjectively what is wanted, and nothing beyond it.

The person in crisis needs to be assisted gently, but clearly, to see all the implications of the choices they make, and how they could affect not only themselves but also those who are part of their life, i.e. family, commitment and mission. They should be alerted about indecision and the tendency to procrastinate. Professional skills are required to assist the client with understanding their own psychodynamics, so that the person realises full responsibility for their life, including the initiation of any change. Since the counselling advises against making a hasty decision or merely resolving a temporary conflict, the counselor should help the client to identify their gifts and abilities, to set realistic goals, to concentrate on developing some constructive activities/hobbies, to invest in writing a book, or try some healthy new adventures.

The Dynamic Growth at Midlife

Morton Kelsey, the author of *“Adventure Inward”* (1980), wisely underscores the dynamic growth process of a person undergoing midlife transition period, by alerting the person to the fact that “the seed seldom grows until something has cracked the husk of its potentiality and allowed its life to germinate and begin to grow.”

It is around the 40th or 45th year that one may suddenly experience that the regular treadmill has come to a halt. When one goes through mid-life crisis, one has to battle with shattered fatigue during which time one can do very little for oneself, much less serve others adequately. Midlife crisis can be experienced through physical illness, low energy and a sense of depression where one may even cry ceaselessly. At this stage the experiences of the plateau are more than the peaks of hope. It is during such depression one needs professional help or regular psychological and spiritually integrated guidance.

In the case of a religious seeking help, the professional should be a skilled religious who will afford the client the opportunity to reflect on their own experience, initially totally unknown to them. Such an encounter can gradually lead the client to discover their personal strengths and limitations. They gain an awareness of

their ego-strengths which could blend and complement their growth. It is also necessary that during professional counseling, and if the client is experiencing deep depression, that they be relieved of the major responsibilities that would distract them.

The reality is that the person is experiencing a time of hitting rock bottom in their personal life and, sense of self-worth/identity. The deep depression can even lead one to believe that they have been wrongly committed and are being disillusioned by the goal. The therapist needs to allow the client time and space to mourn over the feelings of loss, incompetency and extreme frustration.

The therapist will gently lead the client to see how much they have been overly dependent on their own importance, and perhaps have now turned out to be a victim to workaholism: focusing on what was 'produced' rather than on 'being'. Time set aside for deeper reflection may help the client to gradually realize that the values learnt were perhaps not really internalized, but rather had been a mere compliance to them or identification with them.

The awareness that they have not personally assimilated their life's goal as a 'mother, partner, or ordained religious/minister' may lead to deeper discouragement or lower self-worth.

The therapist, however, persuades the client not to concentrate on regrets or what has not been achieved, but to pursue what could yet be achieved by gaining realistic insight with regards to the family/community, friends, talents and professional achievements. Maintaining a journal of all their positive assets may assist some people to concentrate less on their vulnerabilities and dependencies, and to relax and adapt to the natural rhythms of life around them. An awareness of the 'gift of time' may alert the client to spend quality time alone to be with their thoughts and feelings, and to experience oneself in the presence of one's creator in deep silence and intimacy – such experiences would enable the growth process to set in and for one to be gentle with oneself. Such a new experience may help the person not so much to calm the storm of the ocean within, but rather to pass through the waves to the stillness of the deeper waters within.

In the light of this experience the client is gradually brought to focus on finding meaning in their life's goal, and plumbing new

depths in relationships which would give a healthy sense of well-being both at the physical and psychological level. There would be a gradual convergence of self-worth, to recognize one's depth of spirituality, moving beyond the grounded reality of everyday life.

An Experience of New Life

It begins with an emergence from a mid-life transition/crisis to a stillness of a confident 'Now'! The long inward journey would pierce through the dark tunnel with a new light that is gentle, and brilliant. And although it was there all along, the light was merely dimmed by the crisis of mid-life. Indeed the cracking of the husk (the mid-life crisis) is not easy. Yet, allowing one's husk gently to crack open, can nurture 'New Life' bringing forth the sparks of hope, peace and tranquility.

Reflecting on my own professional experience in helping to bring forth such signs of new life for others, this entailed creating a sacred moment for them. Concerted efforts were needed, in identifying with the compassionate and understanding personality of "Jesus, the healer". It is 'quality listening, understanding the psycho-genesis and the dynamic process that led up to mid-life crisis in the person at a crucial age, and following it up consistently and with persevering efforts' that made a difference. It also entailed hours spent in prayer, discernment, and the ability to use timely 'care-frontation' with a great deal of sustained patience. Hence, a professional counselor needs to be alert and cautious in observing such guidelines as:

1. Leading the person to recognize the crisis
2. Helping the person to see that the feelings and behaviour are linked to this mid-life crisis
3. Guiding and assuring that others also have similar experiences
4. Discouraging radical changes in one's life-commitment
5. Searching for realistic options to meet immediate needs
6. Never making decisions for your clients

Conclusion

Carl Jung observes in his book *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, (1971), that “we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life’s morning.” Mid-life crisis creates a shift in our life, in both a helpful and unfortunate way. It is helpful, because it invites us to be more attentive to the refocusing of psychic energy that takes place in our middle years. Unfortunately, it leaves us with the impression that the reinforcing usually comes about abruptly through some form of emotional crisis. However, after we have learnt the ecstasy and agony of love, the ebb of passion and the demands of committed parenting/life of celibacy, in the middle-years, we need to listen to our needs for intimacy with a new level of attentiveness. Emerging from middle age is grand! Understanding the rhythms of life should be made a priority at every stage of human development, although one may not be able to work through all of the “whys” and “wherefores”.

Although for some people this period may be relatively quiet, being the best years of one’s life with a far-reaching process, for others it is a journey towards delving into the deeper dimensions of the self through a ‘time for trusting, reassessing, and deepening’. Psychological and spiritual health does not consist in forfeiting oneself but in keeping the process integrative which will challenge all human beings to grow into and claim their conscious and responsible human development to strive always for the “more-being” contained in the future possibilities. The principal function of growing is to be open to the mystery of the self, to be ready to transcend self, and to ‘let-go’ with full awareness. This is a way of directing our energy into the deeper currents of life. In the words of Jesus, “Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (Mk 8: 35 -36).

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