

The Midlife Challenge

In my private practice, I often work with individuals who are in their forties and who are seeking out psychotherapy for the first time in their lives. Usually, this is because they are facing a huge loss of some kind, and much of what used to be important in their lives has completely changed. One of the tasks for people in their forties is to begin to come to terms with the reality of the passage of time. The stark realization that there will not always be time for everything one might want to do or be in this life can be devastating. Although this can bring forth challenging inner work, the forties also offers an invitation to author a more meaningful narrative of our lives.

It is not an option to grow stagnant if we are to mature. As Carl Jung often stated, we cannot live the afternoon of our lives in the same ways that we lived the morning of them. Our youth-centred culture casts a long shadow upon us, and sometimes we find ourselves scrambling in our forties to hold onto the vestiges of youth. The classic midlife crisis is found in the person who buys the shiny new sports car or some other symbol of youth, or who dates a much younger person or goes to extremes to preserve a youthful appearance. At a deeper level, such individuals might really be running from themselves and/or death.

The task of moving into the next phase of growth lies in facing the truth that time is going by, and we will not be able to do everything we dreamed about or hoped for in our lives. As Henri Nouwen wrote, we must mourn what we have lost in our lives thus far at midlife. We must mourn the lost opportunities, the lost dreams, the wounds, and all that we did not get to do. It is important to acknowledge these losses, and genuinely feel the pain of them.

But, we must not stop there. If we cling to the past and to old injuries, we cannot move forward and fully absorb all that our lives actually are in the present or the future. In letting go of past hopes, we can then gather what we have learned about ourselves and our choices so far and move forward with a deeper understanding of the human condition. We can recognize and be grateful for the gifts and wisdom that the first halves of our lives have given us no matter how chaotically.

There will always be untapped potential and infinite possibilities within each of us. It is right at the moment when we come to terms with this paradox that we can begin to clearly see what our lives have brought us and what they have not. We can then choose to stand in our own uniqueness, and forgive ourselves for our pasts no matter what they might be. This task requires great love and strength. But, the reward of this inner work is that you can take in what has been accomplished, enjoyed, and experienced thus far - indeed, the richness that pervades *all* of life - in a much fuller way.

For every moment, relationship, opportunity or experience is all the more valuable because one is keenly aware that it will not endure. Moments and opportunities will end, so it is vital to live

them wholeheartedly. In doing so, we can courageously move forward with grace towards the heretofore unknown next phases of our lives. As Carl Jung said, it is the privilege of a lifetime to become who you truly are. When you are aligned with life, not retreating or fighting but expanding and accepting, you are then able to actually *be* where you are and enjoy the gifts of your life no matter what they might be.