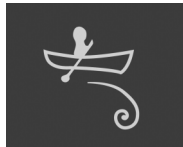


Men Navigating Midlife

Robyn Vickers-Willis



Wayfinder Publishing

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foreword

MIDLIFE IN ITS MANY dimensions is a blank spot in our culture. Yet never before has our world been more in need of the wisdom that comes from those who are willing to go on the profound psychological and spiritual journey that occurs at midlife.

We are fortunate indeed that Robyn Vickers-Willis has once again brought midlife transition vibrantly to life as she continues to demonstrate her insight and sensitivity for this often misunderstood, highly significant stage. Through storytelling, personal reflections and the use of metaphor she explores this heroic journey towards wholeness, balance and the wisdom of the elder. In *Men Navigating Midlife* she presents the candid and compelling personal stories of the men she interviewed. Sharing her own experiences and insights, Robyn provides practical exercises while exploring the themes that emerge from these men's stories.

Men Navigating Midlife is a valuable contribution to our understanding about midlife transition and a companion piece to Robyn Vickers-Willis' first book, *Navigating Midlife: women becoming themselves*. Her writing is warm, direct and accessible. Whether you are just approaching midlife, new into midlife, long into midlife, beyond midlife or just wanting to understand better this stage of life, you will

find this book speaks to your mind and your heart. May it have a long publishing life.

Robert A. Johnson

Best-selling author of *He, She, We*, *Inner Work*,
Transformation, *Owning Your Own Shadow* and
Balancing Heaven and Earth

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preface

WHEN I WROTE MY first book about midlife transition, *Navigating Midlife: women becoming themselves*, I focused on women's experiences at midlife, deciding that my second book would be for men. Interestingly, when male friends and clients read the book they made comments such as, 'But I feel like that too' or, 'It was the same for me'. The first time I went on talkback radio to discuss *Navigating Midlife: Women becoming themselves* I had more men than women ringing in to ask questions, and whenever I have spoken about the book there have nearly always been interested men present. And often women have asked questions such as, 'Is it the same for my husband/partner/brother?' So writing *Men Navigating Midlife* feels like a natural progression for me in my writing journey.

Men Navigating Midlife is a book about men, written for both men and women. In my first book, my own story and the stories of other women provided the vehicle to explore strategies and understandings that assist the process of midlife transition. In this book, men's stories have been the vehicle through which we continue our exploration of understandings and strategies that support us as we navigate midlife transition. At times these are particularly pertinent to a man's journey at midlife. However, for the most part

the themes explored are just as relevant for women as they are for men.

I have been a psychologist for 25 years and during this time I have always worked with male as well as female clients. I grew up with three brothers and a father, and despite going to an all-girls' school, I have always had several platonic male friends from an early age. I was married for eighteen years and our relationship had both egalitarian and traditional qualities. I am a mother of a daughter and two sons, all born in the early 1980s. As a result of the women's movement, issues of stereotyping, of nurture versus nature, have been a fairly constant part of my personal and professional thinking life since I was a young woman.

Over the course of my life's journey, I have moved through many different stages in how I relate to men. Because of the type of young girl I was, and because of what I observed as acceptable and worthy of attention when I was young, I often wished I was a boy. This feeling stayed with me until I was in my mid-thirties. As I struggled with my own 'inner male' and started to empower myself and engage in the world in a way that better suited me, I increasingly appreciated being a woman. I also believe some resentment within me that I had projected onto men began to decline.

In the past ten years I have gradually come to a place where I feel very grateful for my life as I enjoy the friendship and companionship of a variety of men and women. I acknowledge that there are differences between us; however, increasingly I wonder how much of this is due to our conditioning, rather than innate gender differences. And after using Carl Jung's understandings around personality type while working as an organisational consultant in the past fifteen years, I now see that personality can cut across gender expectations. I believe we are each unique individuals, whether male or female, and the more we can grow into and celebrate our own uniqueness, and the uniqueness of others, the better off we are, and the better off the world will be. As we celebrate our uniqueness we become more willing to see our commonality. This understanding

becomes particularly pertinent as we move through the significant psychological developmental stage of midlife transition.

For the twelve years before starting to write, I ran my own business. I was a consultant to corporations and my work involved facilitating a variety of aspects of corporate change management, including development of personnel, developing and running courses in such areas as leadership development, team development, mentoring and performance management. I also carried out individual counselling and coaching. Very early on I realised what a privileged position I was in as men shared their vulnerabilities with me—something I know men don't necessarily easily do. I had a sense that because I was a female consultant I was allowed insights that a male consultant might not be. I remember discussing this with one of my interviewees who worked in the business world. He said, 'When I am talking to a man I'm always sort of on the defensive—it's as though there is always this competition going on between us. With you, it is different. I trust that you will still think I'm okay no matter what I say.'

Once I finished *Navigating Midlife: women becoming themselves*, I started to interview men for this second book, to see what they had to say about their experience of midlife transition. Would men spontaneously come up with similar themes to those explored in my first book? Through the interview process I tried to ask questions only when I felt men needed encouragement to expand on themes they were discussing. I wanted men to tell their stories however they wished.

I interviewed over 30 men who were prepared to share aspects of their inner and outer worlds. These represent the full educational range. Some left school at fifteen years of age and have had no further formal education. Others had completed years of tertiary training; some had achieved doctoral qualifications. Some were professionals, either on a salary or self-employed; others worked in a trade; some were studying. Interviewees ranged in age from 37 years to 53 years. Some were married, others divorced, some never married, some

remarried, and others were in a de facto relationship. All names have been changed. Also, while being careful not to change the psychological content of their stories, I have altered some of the background details of the interviewees so that identities are disguised. I appreciate enormously the generosity of spirit of these men as they have contributed their time, their hearts, their minds and parts of their life stories to assist me in my project.

When I mentioned this book to friends and acquaintances, often their response was, 'But can you get men to talk?' I have found that interviewees have been keen to talk and to be listened to. Men have told me that they enjoyed having the opportunity to tell their story. This did not surprise me as I already knew from researching my first book that telling your story at midlife is a healing thing to do.

Interviews usually went for one and a half hours. In the interviews several men talked about their loneliness and how they would love to be able to share with other men in the way they were with me. Few had taken the steps to find a 'safe place' where they could speak to men in such an open way. My hope is that as they read this book, men will find a place to share and better understand their own story, as well as become aware of a variety of ideas and tools they can use to support themselves as they navigate midlife.

In the process of researching this book I have read many books written by and for men. I have incorporated some of their insights along with the stories of those I interviewed and my own observations and experiences of the midlife journey. My aim has been to work sensitively as I explore the many issues facing men at midlife, to be a compassionate commentator, an attitude that has increasingly become my approach towards men over the past ten years, both in my personal and professional life.

I believe the women's movement has done much to raise the consciousness of women of the baby boomer generation so that many have been able to take full advantage of the window of opportunity for personal growth and healing at midlife. They are doing this in a way our mothers' generation was not empowered to do. All of us

are affected by the limitations of living within the stereotype of a power-focused society. It often determines what parts of us we disown as we conform in the first half of our life. In such a society women have not fared well; however, neither have many men. I believe that baby boomer men in the West are themselves struggling to create liberation from the restrictiveness of living in a power-focused society.

It is normal in the first half of life to disown parts of ourselves as we conform to the society we live in. However, if we are ultimately to fulfil our destiny and contribute to society with the ‘wisdom of the elder’, we need to be willing to move beyond the restrictiveness of our culture’s gender stereotypes. My hope is that, as men read *Men Navigating Midlife*, connect with other men’s stories, connect with their own, and learn about the importance of moving through midlife transition, they find a way to create a second half of life that is alive with personal meaning.

I wish to thank a number of people—first of all, to the men who generously gave their time and parts of their life stories to *Men Navigating Midlife*. My friend Elizabeth Ackland and her daughter, Jackie, shared their beautiful home with me in the Byron Bay hinterland, as did Robert Bruce—places to which I retreated to write. Nurturing times with my friend, Siegfried Gutbrod, have supported me as I wrote. Peter Hay, Ross Johnston, Dr Manfred Krautschneider, Heather Nankervis, Ian Renard and Paul Sanders gave me support by reading the final manuscript and providing invaluable feedback. The wonderful publishing team from Allen & Unwin have once again worked with sensitivity and professionalism—Annette Barlow, the senior commissioning editor; Colette Vella, the senior editor; Karen Ward, the copyeditor; and Nada Backovic, the cover designer. As always, my children have been a constant source of love and encouragement. And finally, to all the other people in my life who have given me support along the way, thank you.

Robyn Vickers-Willis, January 2004

CHAPTER 1

introduction

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

Robert Frost, 'The Road Not Taken'

I look around me at my job, my family, my home, my car, my life and none of it seems to mean anything to me anymore. The thought of sitting in another business meeting makes me feel sick to the stomach and at home I'm like a stranger to my wife and kids. The only time I feel remotely relaxed is when I'm playing computer games or watching television . . . there must be more to life than this! Joanne is nagging me and now I keep fantasising about leaving a farewell note on the kitchen table, getting in my car and just driving as far away as possible. I think I'm going crazy. You see, it's only a little while ago I thought my life was pretty perfect. (John, aged 42)

MENTION THE TERM 'male midlife crisis' and it is likely to instigate jokes and stories about flashy sports cars, young blondes and endless hours in front of the mirror. It conjures up images of men creating all sorts of distractions to stop themselves noticing that they are getting older. To use the word 'crisis' to describe a man's experience at this time of life can be destructive to his own personal

growth, for by doing so a mindset can be created that this is a thing to fear, to avoid, to repress. This stereotypical way of viewing men's midlife change as a 'crisis' adds even further to men's anxiety as they feel from within a need to make significant changes in their life. For between the ages of 35 to 50 their psyche is pushing them to do the significant inner psychological work of midlife transition.

A TIME OF SIGNIFICANT PSYCHOLOGICAL CHANGE

Our psyche is pre-programmed to encourage us to make changes at certain ages in our life, give or take a few years, so that we can move on to the next developmental stage. It is like a blueprint within all of us. We acknowledge that adolescents go through a time of significant change as they move through the transition from childhood to early adulthood. From their early teens until about twenty years of age a young person's psyche encourages them to complete the tasks of separating from the ways of their childhood and to move towards being part of the adult world. There is an equally important stage of psychological transition for adults at midlife as we move from early adulthood to middle adulthood.

A key concept of psychological growth conceived by Carl Jung, the renowned Swiss psychoanalyst, is that of *individuation*. Individuation is a process within our psyche encouraging us to become more uniquely individual. If individuation goes well, gradually, over our life span we each acquire a fuller, clearer and unique identity. It is a crucial aspect of development in childhood and adolescence. Jung was the first psychologist to recognise that a resurgence of individuation occurs in the middle years and continues through the rest of life.

Midlife transition is a bridging time between the first and second half of life with the dividing period being somewhere around 40. The usual pattern of psychological development in the first half is to create a life based on what others—especially parents,

other significant adults, our peers and society in general—expect of us. Therefore, up to his mid to late thirties a man normally refers to his outer world to determine how he should live. For healthy development in the second half of life we refer to our inner world to determine how we should live. To achieve this transition in life orientation at midlife we must give priority in our life to two tasks—to go within to find out more about our own true nature, and concurrently start creating a life where we can be the person we realise we are.

TURBULENT FEELINGS ARE NORMAL AT MIDLIFE

This transition between the first and second half of life is not like a solid bridge that we can easily stroll across. It is more like a flimsy swing bridge, seemingly over the deep chasm of the unknown. There are usually feelings of great insecurity. Some may navigate this bridge and the developmental tasks with a certain amount of ease, although from my observation this is rare. Others start across, get scared and go back, perhaps never to venture out again. Others find the first steps very scary, but once they have started they know there is no turning back. Some try to jump to the other side too quickly and in the process end up feeling very precarious and unbalanced in their life situation. They may never find a steady enough hold to cross the bridge of midlife transition.

A traumatic event frequently plays an important part in instigating midlife transition. The same event would have different meaning and consequences if it occurred at another time in life, for at around 40 we are not simply reacting to this external situation. We are also acting on the internal promptings from our psyche.

An event, such as divorce, ill health or the loss of his job may trigger the start of a man's reappraisal of himself and his whole life. Such an event may bring about what is commonly referred to as a 'midlife crisis'. The crisis is the actual point of choice. Will he change

or won't he? He may start a period of reappraisal, or, alternatively, he may ignore the inner promptings from his psyche and choose to do little to get to know himself better. For example, during a life-threatening illness a man might realise how tired he is of pushing his way through his work to the point of exhaustion, yet returns to work and his old life as if nothing has happened.

Perhaps he is fearful of losing the identity he has maintained for so long; or that if he looks into his inner world he will find there is nothing of substance there; or that he will not like what he finds. He continues on as he has done, although others will notice a lack of spark, a resigned acceptance, a rigidity and weariness in his demeanour. He is 'battening down the hatches' to continue his journey in the second half of life in more or less the same way as he has in the first.

Or after an event such as a marriage breakdown a man may make dramatic external changes, flipping from one extreme lifestyle to another, such as from a conservative, restrictive lifestyle to a permissive one. If he continues on this path without taking the time to get to know himself, he is likely to be no more in touch with his true self in the second half of life than he was in the first. In both these cases a man is avoiding the long and at times arduous journey of midlife transition. He also relinquishes the opportunity of enjoying the benefits of this journey—a second half of life full of personal meaning, vitality, joy and passion.

How will you know if you have started midlife transition? Perhaps you will experience one of the situations just described, which might set you on a path of ongoing reflection and transformation. Or perhaps somewhere around the age of 40 you will start feeling a discontent. You no longer feel fired up about the work to which you have so eagerly given lots of time and energy in the past. Much of your life feels meaningless to you. Your energy is low. These feelings are encouraging you to reappraise who you are and how you are living your life.

**TIME ALONE FOR SELF-REFLECTION
IS ESSENTIAL AT MIDLIFE**

If you ignore these feelings, through busyness or diversions such as affairs, alcohol or endless acquisition, your body sends even stronger signs. You feel depressed. You become snappy with your family, friends and colleagues. You might experience a debilitating illness. All these are warning signs for you to stop, to go within and take the time to ask yourself the following questions.

- Who am I?
- How contented am I with my life—my work, my relationships, my leisure time?
- Given that I am halfway through my life, do I want to keep on living my life in the same way or do I want to make changes?
- What is meaningful to me?
- What do I value? Is my life reflecting these values?
- By what beliefs have I been living my life? Whose are they? Are they just illusions?
- What could I do to start tapping into unknown parts of myself?
- What stops me from making changes?

The way men respond to the challenge of finding answers to these questions depends on a variety of factors—their personality, their past experiences, perceived flexibility within their present life structure, and how effectively they have completed the tasks of past developmental stages. Some will quickly take on the challenge of this inner questioning, finding a variety of ways to explore themselves and their world. Others will go very slowly and cautiously, making changes after much careful analysis. Some will be terrified at the thought of changing anything and will hold on to their old life in fear. They may make superficial changes in their outer life, but never truly come to grips with who they are—still choosing to live by society's expectations of them, rather than looking within themselves

for their own answers. Other men will find superficial answers to these questions, not wanting to do the hard, soul-searching work of midlife transition, and as a result create a different, but equally incongruent lifestyle.

FINDING ANSWERS TO MIDLIFE QUESTIONS

So how do men start finding answers to some of these questions? Do men and women navigate midlife transition in similar ways or are there significant differences in how they experience this stage of life? Each person's story is unique; no other person's process of growth and change is exactly like our own. Nevertheless, others' stories can serve as a guide in contacting our own inner wisdom by showing us a way inside ourselves to where the voice most important to us dwells. When we find that voice, we must treasure it, as it will help us to navigate the journey of midlife transition to our own true identity in the second half of life. My intent is that *Men Navigating Midlife* offers a framework for exploring and understanding men's midlife journey to that inner wisdom.

THE BENEFITS ARE ENORMOUS

Moving through midlife transition often involves much pain. So why choose to move through it? What has a man to gain from this journey? As I describe some of the benefits of midlife transition, ask yourself how it would be to have them as part of your life.

A man who has moved through midlife transition has passion for what he is doing because it is deeply connected to what is most meaningful to him. His body is relaxed. He is vital. He has a sparkle in his eyes. He has a deep understanding and connection with himself, and at the same time is able to connect with ease and understanding to others. He is tolerant, not extreme in his views, and balanced in how he approaches and judges himself and others.

The world he has created for himself in the second half of his life suits him well, so his journey often seems easier than it did in the first half of life. He is free of addictions. By this I do not mean he won't enjoy a drink from time to time, or whatever takes his fancy. However, when he does, it is out of pure pleasure, not as a way of running away from his pain. He is comfortable not only with experiencing his feelings, but also with talking about them. This in turn allows him to develop relationships with others that are open and that acknowledge everyone's needs and interests. He has an expanded ability to nourish and honour all parts of himself—his physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual selves. He also has an expanded ability to nourish others. With increased awareness of who he is and what is important to him, he develops intimate and honest relationships with himself, with others, and with his environment. And with this increased awareness he is also able to own and honour his unique abilities and wisdom, and share them in the world.

I hope this description is enough to encourage you to read on, for as you can see the benefits of moving through midlife transition are enormous!

PART 1

What is midlife transition?

CHAPTER 2

the psychology of midlife transition

God bless our contradictions, those parts of us which seem out of character. Let us be boldly and gladly out of character. Let us be creatures of paradox and variety; creators of contrast; of light and shade; creatures of faith. God be our constant. Let us step out of character into the unknown, to struggle and love and do what we will. Amen

Michael Leunig, *Common Prayer Collection*

WHILE WRITING MY FIRST book on midlife at the age of 47 I read over 100 books, mainly psychological ones, and many based on the teachings of Carl Jung, the renowned Swiss psychoanalyst. My reading and writing helped me to understand and then conceptualise my own experience of midlife transition.

It wasn't until after I had completed my six years of training to be a psychologist and counsellor that I learnt a lot about Jung's ideas. Some psychologists are wary of them. One of the reasons is because of his spiritual, as well as psychological focus. Yet for me this is an important aspect of his work. As we live in a materialistic world and struggle to have spirituality as part of our lives, Jung's ideas can show us how to bridge the two and create meaning in our lives.

Jung's psychology is a 'meaning making' psychology. From within the Jungian framework meaning is found when we connect with our inner world through activities such as making time to just 'be', analysing our dreams, writing in a journal, exploring myths and fairy tales, engaging in music, dance and a variety of other creative pursuits. For Jung, the unconscious is the source of creativity in our lives. At midlife we can use his ideas to release within ourselves a creative way of living and of being that in the past has seemed like an impossible dream. Jung's ideas are many and varied. As we read about them and discover that they resonate with our own life and with what we observe in others, we find his ideas are also meaningful and useful. His theories link in with belief systems of many other cultures. He developed his ideas first, and then discovered these links and saw this as affirmation of his understandings.

If Jung's psychology is of no interest to you, you can skip this chapter and still benefit from the rest of the book. However, while researching and speaking on midlife I have become aware that he has a wide following. His psychological insights have much to offer us today as we all search for how to create meaning in our own lives at a time when our larger world increasingly seems to lack it. If you have not read of his ideas before, I suggest you suspend judgment, and read on.

THE PSYCHE

Jung called our total psychological structure the *psyche*, the Greek word for soul. He conceived the psyche as having three layers of consciousness. At the surface is the *conscious*, below this is the *personal unconscious*, and at the base the *collective unconscious*. We can compare it to an iceberg. The top layer, the conscious, is that part that can be seen. The middle layer, the personal unconscious, is just below the surface of awareness. We most easily become aware of its contents when we are willing to dive below the surface. The bottom layer, the collective unconscious, is way down deep and is by far the

biggest part. As when the *Titanic* hit the iceberg, it is the part below the surface that we can't see and are not aware of that can most easily sink us.

The conscious contains all those psychological parts of ourselves we are aware of and can control and direct at will. When we are living consciously we are adaptable, flexible, discerning and rational and we evaluate ourselves and others in non-extreme ways. We view life in shades of grey, rather than in black and white. In the first half of life our conscious feels big and busy, but is in fact the part of our psyche that least directs our behaviour. Until we have moved through midlife transition much of our behaviour is dominated by our unconscious.

Our personal unconscious is made up of our unwanted desires, uncivilised impulses and forbidden feelings and beliefs that we have repressed from consciousness, deliberately or unconsciously forgotten. Here we also find hidden positive and creative qualities and abilities. Our collective unconscious is the part of our unconscious that is not individual, but rather universal and shared. It contains the archetypes.

Archetypes are deep and abiding patterns of being, behaving, perceiving and responding. They remain powerful and present in all of us over time, although they need to be activated within us for us to experience them. They are found in the archetypal stories and mythology of all peoples and are responsible for universal tendencies occurring throughout humankind. For example, when activated in a positive way, the warrior archetype helps us to claim our power and assert our identity in the world. Major archetypal images that are important in understanding psychic processes at midlife are the *persona*, the *shadow* and the *Self*.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EGO AND THE PERSONA

We experience a number of transitions in the first half of life and they all help us to become a separate social identity. Up until the age of about fourteen years much of what we do psychologically is governed

by instinct, by our unconscious. Around puberty consciousness really begins to develop. From this time until midlife we transform our nature by developing a strong *ego* and *persona*.

The ego is made up of those parts we are prepared to accept as ourself. From this conscious understanding about who we are, we create various personae, or masks. We make our choice about which personae to show depending on what we see as acceptable or as being required by different people and situations in our life. If all goes well in our development in the first half of life, we transform our true nature into a strong ego and persona. We develop our strengths and this inevitably leads to one-sidedness in our nature. We find ways of supporting ourselves emotionally and physically by developing effective relationships, interests and careers. This is what is required to create a solid foundation for our self in the first half of life. In the first half of life it is very much an outer journey and it's very important that it be so, as we need to create a place where we can feel secure in the world. In Jungian psychology it is critical to develop a strong ego in the first half of life if we are to navigate midlife transition.

PSYCHIC ENERGY

Energy operating in the psyche, known as *psychic energy*, moves in a direction so as to maintain balance, or to compensate, within our psyche. In the first half of life, every affirmation that we have made in the conscious mind has had its opposite affirmed in the unconscious. For every wish and every intention that we are aware of, we also unconsciously wish and intend the opposite. And the differentiation of our conscious affirmations from our unconscious opposites actually creates the psychic energy, also known as *libido*, that runs our psyche. For example, if you grew up with an overly controlling attitude to your outer, conscious world your psychic energy would counterbalance this attitude by presenting a compensating 'out of control' attitude in your inner, unconscious world.

THE SHADOW

As more favourable or socially acceptable parts of our self are intensified in our conscious, their opposites are pushed back into our unconscious. This weaker side coalesces into our *shadow*. These shadow aspects in ourselves are often projected onto others in whom they may or may not be present. Our shadow also shows itself in unaccountable behaviour where we find ourselves saying, 'I was not myself. I don't know what came over me.'

THE SELF

At midlife our psyche encourages us to take an inner journey to integrate the contents of our unconscious, bring together all the missing parts of ourself, including our shadow, into a complete and whole conscious *Self*. This Self in Jungian psychology is the centre of our being, both conscious and unconscious. It is distinct from our ego, which is the centre of our conscious life. This Self is in contrast to the self used in everyday terminology. When I use Self in this book, with a capital S, I am referring to that which represents our truest nature.

INDIVIDUATION

The process of moving towards wholeness is known in Jungian psychology as *individuation*. The Self archetype is the prime mover in our psyche at midlife moving us towards individuation. Individuation occurs all our life, however it is at its most potent at midlife. From around 35 years of age, our Self encourages us to reclaim all those parts of ourselves that we repressed in our unconscious in the process of conforming in the first half of life, as well as other parts we have never been conscious of. As we do this work and become more of the person we were born to be, we create more balance in our psyche and greater psychological health.

BALANCE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH

In Jungian theory psychological health is defined as balance between all of the opposite attitudes, desires and ways of being that are part of us. As we allow ourselves to move through the process of individuation, we find ways to bring about the integration of these opposites. As we become more aware of these opposites within us, it is important for us to live creatively so we can accept and express every part of ourselves. For example, when we have lived a very structured first half of life, it is important to find creative ways to live more flexibly. This way we are able to draw on both our structured and flexible attitudes, integrating these polarities. This leads to increased balance and psychological health.

MIDLIFE TRANSITION

Somewhere between the ages of 35 to 40 there is a shift within our psyche as our ego loses energy. This encourages the contents from our unconscious to come up to consciousness. This change can be a gradual process experienced as a growing realisation that we aren't the person we thought we were. Roles and relationships with our work and with intimate others start to feel restrictive. With increasing incongruence between the person inside we now perceive, and the life we are living, we feel desperate to make a change.

Often midlife transition is instigated through a traumatic happening, such as loss of parents, marriage breakdown, loss of job or loss of health. Such a traumatic happening has a different impact on us at midlife to other times of life. With our ego weakening, such an event encourages us to question all the values, attitudes and assumptions that have given us meaning and certainty in the first half of life. It is as though our sense of who we are and what we want in our life collapses along with all our attitudes, beliefs and illusions.

This is a time of great confusion as much of our suppressed unconscious comes to the surface. For example, if previously we

felt in control, now we feel out of control. If we have been strong our vulnerability will now overwhelm us. If we have experienced our first half of life primarily through words, now words will fail us. If our feelings were suppressed and we approached life in a passionless way, now our feelings overwhelm us. If we have been weak we will now express strength. If we have been energetic, we will now be languid. If we have been very close in our relationships, we will now yearn for separateness. If we have been alone, we will now yearn for connection.

THE THREE STAGES OF MIDLIFE TRANSITION

Whether change starts traumatically or as a slower process, we move through three distinct phases in midlife transition. In his book, *In Midlife*, Murray Stein describes these three stages as *separation*, *liminality* and *reintegration*. Although these stages will be discussed in a discrete, linear way they are from my experience a more flowing and at times chaotically interwoven process.

SEPARATION

At the beginning of midlife transition, without necessarily knowing why we are doing so, we find ourselves observing our personae, the masks we have developed in the first half of life. The word 'persona' comes from the Latin word for mask and actors wore them on the ancient stage. During the first half of life we develop these personae, or masks, to help us adapt to the various situations and people we deal with. For example, a man might present an easygoing, chatty persona with friends and a reserved and analytical persona with colleagues. His various masks become his conscious idea of himself and in all their different forms become his ego. To achieve separation, the first stage of midlife transition, a man has to separate his understanding of Self from these masks. Perhaps an example will help here.

Bob

I met Bob, aged 49, a couple of years ago. He had just moved from the family property in country Victoria to the city, after working the land and raising a family there for twenty years. When I met him he was in his second year of studying social work with the goal to work with young people. I was fascinated to hear more about Bob's story, recognising what a huge shift he and his family had made. He talked about how in his late thirties he almost overnight sensed a lack of energy for the work he had so easily done before. Until that time there had never been any doubt that he would work the land all his life. He told me, 'Being the only son, I was expected to come home to the farm. I had never questioned this assumption.'

Over the next couple of years, despite good seasons, his income decreased as he stopped being so attentive to the myriad of things he needed to do. He described how anxious he became; he wondered if he was going crazy. From being a hardworking, focused, confident farmer, husband and father he had become an unreliable, anxious, depressed person. After several months of just hoping everything would get back to 'normal' he was galvanized into action when a local farmer suicided. Finally acknowledging to himself how bad he was feeling, he consulted his general practitioner who referred him to a local counsellor. After several months of weekly counselling he started to accept that he had a yearning to leave the country life and move back to the city where he had studied agricultural science many years beforehand. At this stage he wasn't clear what he wanted to do there, he just knew he wanted to make the change. At first his wife was resistant, but then accepted that with their two daughters about to move to the city for further study, it might work. She also began to realise that she could more easily start fulfilling some of her own dreams by accessing many of the advantages of living in a city.

In his book, *In Midlife*, Stein talks about a 'crack' opening in our identity, a crack that appears between the person we have appeared to

be in our own eyes and in the eyes of others, and the person we are now starting to sense we truly are. He goes on to say that as terrifying as the experience of this sudden 'crack' in the identity is, it is often the best way, for otherwise the ego's natural defences will pull the persona back into place, even though it will now appear a little false. So a man may experience the crack and be so terrified at the thought of leaving his persona identification behind that he pretends nothing has happened and continues living as he has in the past, although a psychological 'unease' can be detected in 'increasingly rigid, out-moded and anxious behaviour'. An extreme example of this is when after a man loses his job, he is unable to tell his wife, and still dresses for work each morning, leaving the house and pretending he still has a job.

Bob explained how distressed he felt as so many of the dreams and ideals he had held about himself and his life disappeared. He often felt overwhelmed by negative feelings and thoughts and wondered if he was going crazy. Having no understanding of why he was feeling as he was he at times felt suicidal, and even planned how to do it. Once he started counselling he found the support he needed to grieve, mourn and then let go of roles, attitudes, values and ways of being that he now knew were not congruent with the person he was starting to recognise he was.

At separation it is normal for a man to experience a range of intense emotions. He may feel grief about dreams that haven't been realised; fear about his feelings that can be overwhelming; and disillusionment with his present life. These emotions can lead to physical and emotional exhaustion. During this time a man supports himself by creating time for reflection, talking to loved ones, counselling, journal writing and any other activity that allows him to be present to himself and his feelings.

If a man is unable to find support for himself at this stage his feelings may easily overwhelm him, perhaps even lead to thoughts of suicide. If he has these thoughts it is vital that he gets professional help. If he becomes overwrought, antidepressants may be necessary.

He needs to be reassured that what he is experiencing is normal given his stage of life, and that he needs to find some support, both professional and otherwise, where he feels safe to explore and express his innermost feelings and thoughts.

At separation much of a man's psychic energy will be directed to:

- separating his own values from those he has acquired during the first half of life
- learning how to connect with and express his emotions
- developing an increased awareness of his personae, or masks, and determining which are part of his authentic Self and which he wants to discard
- grieving for dreams that won't be realised
- forgiving himself and others
- finding a balance between this grieving and moving forward
- becoming aware of new possibilities for his life.

L I M I N A L I T Y

Once a man starts separating from his old way of life, even if it is just psychological separation rather than physical separation, he moves on to the second stage of midlife transition. Liminality is seen as the central experience of the midlife journey. In Latin, *limen* means threshold or doorway, a space betwixt and between. There are strong feelings of confusion, bewilderment and disorientation at this time as a man lets go of his old understanding of himself and the life he wants to live and floats towards the as yet unrealised Self and future. Bob described how he experienced extreme lethargy and then anxiety as he felt 'all at sea' over a period of several years when he gradually let go of all the ways he had defined himself and his world without as yet knowing how things would unfold for him and his family.

In liminality a man has made the decision to leave behind his old identity and old life but is as yet very unsure about the new life he is to create for himself. Often, he can find this time terrifying. Doubts

creep in about whether he has the resources to manage and whether it is just easier to return to the old way of being. It is normal to feel pulled back to the familiar, as with old ways of defining himself and his world gone, a man no longer feels secure. It is important that he gather around himself the support of loved ones, friends and others to sustain him during this uncertain time. Some self-imposed daily routine and structure can also help, as so much else is changing. Bob described how after talking to his counsellor he was prompted to write in a journal every day for half an hour and to go for long afternoon walks. As well as giving some structure to his day, an added bonus of these activities was that they helped him to start finding answers to the myriad of questions running through his mind.

Some helpful questions we can ask ourselves when we feel we are in the liminality stage are:

- If I am not the person I thought I was, who am I?
- Now that I have decided to make a change, how do I want to live my life from here onwards? What are my dreams, daydreams and fantasies trying to tell me?
- What's important to me? What do I want to make time for? What are my values?
- How can I best support myself as I go through all this change?

REINTEGRATION

During the third phase of midlife transition, reintegration, a man moves into the second half of life. After much soul-searching he starts making decisions that enable him to start creating a life that reflects his understanding of Self. Bob finally committed to studying social work and three years later, plans now to dedicate his time to working with young people. After much hard work, life is starting to feel easier as he gains confidence in himself and his new life. He agrees that he still has times when he feels 'all at sea'; however, this usually only lasts for a couple of days, or at the most a couple of weeks.

During these times he writes in his journal and talks to one friend in particular who is doing the same course. He has also rediscovered his love of music and uses this to relax. He accepts that these ‘all at sea’ feelings are just part of his stretching of boundaries. Bob also mentioned that a side benefit of all these changes is that as he has become more in touch with himself, his relationship with his daughters has deepened.

As we achieve the third stage of midlife transition, reintegration, we accept that we have an inner guiding system which helps us to decide how we should live. No longer do we define ourselves or our life by the expectations of our outer world. As we find ways to connect with our inner world we naturally find ourselves:

- reassessing our life goals
- increasing our vigilance about living consciously through daily reflection to check that we are not slipping back into ego-based rather than Self-based decisions
- continuing to integrate our opposites—the repressed attitudes and desires that are part of us
- remaining open to ongoing change and development
- developing increased congruence in all aspects of our life
- enjoying living creatively.

Once we have moved through these three stages of midlife transition others perceive us as natural, open, centred, authentic, accepting and joyous. We will be aware of an ease within our self and a passion for life that can seem quite miraculous. This does not mean that life is easy. As we continue to learn more about ourselves we continue to make changes in our life and in our perception of our Self. This growth comes from being willing to go through the difficult times—and as time goes on we become increasingly confident in our Self-knowledge and skills to deal with the storms and backwaters as we navigate our life.

Men Navigating Midlife is available for purchase online at

www.navigatingmidlife.com



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