



Midlife: The Tasks of the Journey

It is the deepest and most authentic aspects of self, which seek to be unearthed, integrated, and expressed at midlife.

Midlife is a time when the desire to live authentically breaks wide open. A wisdom within us comes knocking at our door and asks to be welcomed in. Whether this experience is termed transition, crisis, or transformation depends on the lens from which it is viewed.

At midlife, the visceral sense that life is waning is powerfully felt. Our awareness of the preciousness of life heightens. This keen awareness sets into motion a process of retrieving neglected dreams and welcoming home exiled aspects of ourselves. We are compelled to embrace and express our deepest truths. There is a desire to enter life with more authenticity, as well as a need to create meaning out of the past, present, and future stories of our lives.

As our innate striving toward self-actualization increases, questions abound and we are catapulted into an in-depth life review. This life-review comes in the form of a surprisingly honest inner conversation. The core qualities of this conversation are curiosity, compassion and courage. The tone is wholehearted and risk-taking.

When we commit ourselves to this conversation, the rewards are abundant:

- Accessing our core worthiness and unique gifts.
- Naming and tending our previously unmet needs.
- Honoring our deepest dreams and longings.
- Gaining the confidence to fully embrace all of who we are, warts and all.
- Building the courage to be authentic and vulnerable.
- Trusting our capacity to speak and live our personal truths, even in the most challenging of situations.
- Opening our hearts to ourselves and others.
- Renewing our energy, sense of possibility, and hope.
- Increasing our creativity and passion.

Midlife is indeed a modern rite of passage that requires a separation from a former way of being and behaving and entering a period of liminality (betwixt and between what was known and what will be known) where the deeper truths of selfhood and life-purpose are revealed. This rite of passage asks us to shed persona and reveal essence, redefine success and failure, and greet all that we encounter as an invitation to open our hearts and minds - ever wider.

Yet, this rite of passage is not always welcome!

Just when life seems to be ordered and defined, (work, family, and personal values solidly ensconced), internal forces, designed to continue the process of adult development, rise up to bring on a crisis of identity and meaning and move us into uncharted waters. Consciously and courageously entering the midlife waters enables a reassessment of our self-hood and life purpose.

Midlife requires integration between young/old, creation/destruction, yin/yang, introversion/extroversion, and attachment/separation. This time of life necessitates a restructuring of the basic framework of our lives to accommodate shifts in identity, relationship, vocation, and personal meaning. From a Jungian perspective, the midlife shift is the awakening and emergence of the soul (creative inspiration, meaning-making, and spiritual connection). It is this deeper aspect of self (defined as soul), which seeks to be accessed and expressed at midlife.

Midlife launches us (willingly and unwillingly) into the zone of transition/crisis/transformation. The function of transition is two-fold: Reorientation and Personal Growth.

Reorientation entails the process of coming to terms with both anticipated and unanticipated changes. These life shifts challenge old beliefs and have the possibility of shaking the foundations of our solid sense of self and place in the world. Some examples might include outer events such as divorce, relocation, job loss, empty nest, planned career changes, personal loss, and acute or chronic illness, as well as inner experiences, such as working through old traumas, the search for personal and spiritual meaning and life purpose, creative expression, and social contribution. Personal growth is the process of letting go of an out-of-date self-image and an incorporation of a more authentic and integrated sense of self.

The onset of transition/crisis/transformation is like entering a “neutral zone”, where our possibilities are limitless. The neutral zone is a phenomenological state between letting go of an old world and beginning a new one and reflects the rhythmic pattern underlying life itself. It is both the place of crisis and the place of transformation and is therefore both terrifying and enlivening. The neutral zone offers us the opportunity of relinquishing beliefs and behaviors that no longer serve us. As we do this - we open the door to honoring our un-lived dreams and acknowledging previously neglected aspects of ourselves.

Disorientation, fear, and confusion are common responses to life-altering change. The neutral zone is often filled with such emotions. If we lack an understanding of the process, we can become confused regretful, and hopeless and stay fixed in crisis without moving into the stage of transformation. If embraced, the neutral zone can be a creative frame of mind that accesses inner resources with which to navigate through the most challenging of life’s changes and transitions. It is akin to the liminal phase of midlife individuation and has the same effect of supporting a reformulation of self that allows for a richer and more valuable contribution to self, loved ones, and society. The transition/crisis/transformation process occurs most dramatically in midlife due to the evolutionary imperative to actualize our full potential, authenticity, and creativity, and bring it full force into the world.

Much like adolescence, this period of life brings with it a crisis of identity that requires periods of disorientation and self-doubt. A redefinition of life-roles, values, and priorities is a

prominent aspect of midlife. These years are the gateway into second adulthood and provide a critical and daunting opportunity to shape a new self that reflects the integration of qualities that have been unacknowledged and unexpressed in the first half of life. This is the period of our lives when life changes dramatically, necessitating a new focus, energy, and dedication to our deepest unfolding.

Creativity plays a central role in supporting a midlife review. Within the framework of midlife, creativity is defined as the personal attributes of daily creativity (openness, aliveness, curiosity, spontaneity, playfulness, and a sense of awe). These attributes are viewed as being necessary for, and emerging out of, our quest for authenticity. In this way, creativity is not a matter of artistic or scientific achievement but instead a conscious intention and general approach to life by which we gain access to the fullness of our potential. Midlife calls us to embrace daily creativity and utilize the tools of innovation, boldness, and courage as we step into making life-altering changes. Imagination, enthusiasm, spontaneity, and inventiveness are the necessary tools for embarking on a life-review.

A life-review is greatly enhanced by engagement in the creative processes of telling and amending life-stories, nurturing self-expression, using the imagination to access unexpressed and empowering images of selfhood, retrieving discarded dreams and goals, and gaining the focus, discipline, and confidence to put our ideas into action. This is the act of writing a well-lived life.

A vital key to navigating the midlife passage is to access previously discarded childhood dreams and self-knowledge. This valuable information is retrieved by listening closely to the parts of ourselves (needs, feelings, expressions, longings, dreams) that were not safe to emerge in childhood or early adulthood. When we lovingly invite these parts to step out of the shadows and listen to what they have to say about our truth, gifts, dreams, and longings, we begin to experience a new level of possibility, confidence, self-worth, and delight.

Midlife can either be a crisis or a growth-producing transition. It is up to us to dare to question the very ground of our being and embrace intentional change, reaping the benefits of the inner work that leads to a life influenced by genuineness, deeper meaning, and fulfillment.

The following midlife tasks support a life-review and provide helpful signposts along the way:

- Access Repressed Dreams and Unexpressed Aspects of Self
- Tell and Revise Life Stories
- Tend to Regrets and Shame
- Name and Tame Fears and Inner Barriers
- Make Peace with the Past
- Clarify Values and Goals
- Redefine Body Image and Sexuality
- Deepen Confidence to Live Wholeheartedly and Authentically
- Transform Anger into Self-Advocacy and Action
- Identify Personal Gifts and Passions

- Offer Gifts and Passions to the World
- Balance Tending to Others and Tending to Self
- Reformulate Intimate Relationships Based on Speaking and Honoring Core Needs and Personal Truths
- Spiritual Quest: Define Meaning and Purpose
- Nurture Creativity and Creative Self-Expression

David Whyte's poem *All The True Vows*, serves as a powerful call into the midlife process of accessing and living one's truth:

All The True Vows

All the true vows
are secret vows
the ones we speak out loud
are the ones we break.

There is only one life
you can call your own
and a thousand others
you can call by any name you want.

Hold to the truth you make
every day with your own body,
don't turn your face away.

Hold to your own truth
at the center of the image
you were born with.

Those who do not understand
their destiny will never understand
the friends they have made
nor the work they have chosen

nor the one life that waits
beyond all the others.

By the lake in the wood
in the shadows
you can
whisper that truth
to the quiet reflection
you see in the water.

Whatever you hear from
the water, remember,

it wants you to carry
the sound of its truth on your lips.

Remember,
in this place
no one can hear you

and out of the silence
you can make a promise
it will kill you to break,

that way you'll find
what is real and what is not.

I know what I am saying.
Time almost forsook me
and I looked again.

Seeing my reflection
I broke a promise
and spoke
for the first time
after all these years

in my own voice,

before it was too late
to turn my face again.
~ David Whyte

Counseling during this time of life is meant to function as a safe holding container for the midlife rite of passage to unfold. There is a need at this time for a safe and affirming 'other', with whom the rigorous and rewarding creative process of self-redefinition can take place. An attuned therapist honors, marks, and gently facilitates the process of life-review and self-renewal. The role of the therapist during this time is one of a midwife who welcomes and practically grounds newly emerging ideas, feelings, values, and goals.

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