



Midlife Transitions . . .

Counselling to support a time of transition

by Kathy Spooner

We can welcome recent moves by various public figures to raise awareness regarding the impact of the menopause on women's lives and wellbeing. Along with the evident biological aspect, the menopause most commonly hits during the point in the life cycle that has been long regarded as one accompanied by deep psychic change.

Dante wrote: 'In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost. Ah, how hard it is to tell of that wood, savage and harsh and dense, the thought of which renews my fear' (*The Inferno* c.1314).

Contemporary Jungian analysts Brewi and Brennan phrase this in terms of a crisis of identity: 'The forty-or-fifty year old has barely said: "This is who I am and who I will be," when he may be toppled from this place of arrival and begin all over again to ask, unconsciously at first, and then more and more painfully in a myriad of ways, "Who am I, really?"¹ Others have noted midlife as a time of a deepening sense of relationship with the spiritual aspect of self. The developmental psychologist John Fowler argues that in midlife the

question 'Who am I?' becomes substituted with 'Whose am I?'² He goes on to argue that when our lives are 'broken open', we become available in new ways to respond to the 'invitation of deepening the spiritual foundations of our lives and of readdressing the issue of partnership with the transcendent' (p.119).

Lives that are 'broken open' seems on the surface a dramatic, possibly exaggerated description of the psychological distress attendant on a process of awareness concerned with ageing. Many people, however, experience sustained inner turbulence; a sense of being unaccountably lost at some point in their mid-adulthood that has a completely different quality to other age / developmental stages. It has a paradoxical quality, captured well in the title of Richard Rhor's book *Falling Upwards* where, following Carl Jung, Rhor refers to the two halves of life and the conviction that 'you cannot walk the second journey with first journey tools'.³

'We cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life's morning - for what was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in the morning

was true will at evening have become a lie.'⁴

Jung believed that midlife transition is prompted by an 'inexorable inner process': a 'deep seated and peculiar change within the psyche' (p.109), which called for a contraction and 'reversal' of our lives, and the necessity of adopting and maintaining an inner focus. There is an absolute sense in his writings that this is a sea-change moment and that the 'truth and ideals' of the first half of life simply will not serve us in the second half. He bemoans the absence of education and preparation for this time, and the lack of religious faith. He believed that the great religions had understood this life process: as the promise of eternity allows us to find meaning and purpose in the second half of life.

William Bridges has formulated a model of the process of transition which he believes we need to understand the rather than 'a thing called a midlife transition'.⁵ His writings helped me structure and contain the shifts that I noticed within myself in my early forties. It is deceptively simple: transitions are about endings, a neutral zone and beginnings. They are not goal-driven as with

change process models (for example Prochaska, Norcross, & DiClemente);⁶ rather they begin with an inner process of letting go of what no longer seems to 'fit' well with us. He argues that

'The whole idea of life stages begins to break down as one enters the midlife transition because we are letting go of that way of living and discovering a different relation to things' (Bridges p.42).

Endings are 'clearing processes' involving 'disengagement', 'disenchantment' and 'disorientation' (pp.108-110). The neutral zone that follows is best described as analogous to the times when, commonly in historic rituals, people removed themselves from their current connections. An example he cites is Jesus' time in the desert before his ministry. Bridges describes the neutral zone as facilitating a process of surrender and renewal, during which people often find ways of being alone, seeking sacred spaces; and are open to different types of awareness and knowing. Finally Bridges suggests that our new beginnings form first in our unconscious. They may be appear 'indirect', 'unimpressive' and 'untidy, heralded by 'internal signals' that alert us to something new and finally welcome: a

vocation that we discover, or find that life has led us to (p.164).

So how can we as counsellors and psychotherapists help clients navigate this 'rite of passage' and especially living in the disorientating neutral zone where our midlife clients are most likely to reside (although often personally unaware) when they seek out therapy for help with their depression or anxiety? Firstly we need to be alert to the subtle markers of midlife transition that should prompt us to work developmentally with clients. Otherwise we risk doing them a disservice, following T.S Eliot our clients will have 'the experience but miss the meaning'.⁷

Clients in midlife may come to therapy with concerns that have a direct relationship to where they are placed in their temporal and social life span. Typically these will be related to one or more of three areas: their feelings about their ageing self and a renewed concern with mortality; their feelings about changes in close familial relationships: with their children, their parents, and / or spouse; and their feelings about changes relating to their work or roles.⁸ Also the glaring absence of 'events' can be a trigger for therapy. These refer to the realisation by the client that, for example, marriage, children,

career, or similar pursuits, have not materialised for them within normative social timeframes.⁹

Golan¹⁰ confirms that clients will not typically arrive asking for help with their midlife transitions, rather they will come with a specific problem with which they feel 'stuck'. He urges us to notice whether the client has a previous history of being resilient and capable of resolving issues for themselves, but this time those skills and abilities seem to elude them. Sooner or later, he advises, issues of meaning and purpose emerge: 'the central existential question arises again and again, "what am I going to do with the rest of my life?"' (p.74).

Brewi and Brennan (see Footnote 1) suggest people may also present with general feelings of lethargy and boredom, with a loss of enthusiasm for present involvements and a concern about the meaning and purpose of their lives. Similarly, May¹¹ argues that 'not all midlife crises are part of the dark night of the soul, but surely some are, and these are characterised by lack of gratification in work, relationships and other endeavours' (p.144).

The clients that I have seen, and understood as being in a midlife transition, have conformed to this pattern. A common theme among them was a feeling of no longer quite being 'themselves', feeling off balance and discontented without a clear idea of why. Kegan¹² would find these signs as confirmative of his ideas about developmental transitions in adulthood. He believes that our sense of self is derived from the meanings we hold, and once these begin to unravel, then we also begin to sense an unsettling change in our perception and understanding of ourselves.

THERAPEUTIC APPROACH

Primarily, the midlife developmental transition, when supported and given sufficient time and space to unfold, is an



interior and reflective process. A person find themselves reviewing their life history; maybe grieving for the life they imagined, but have not had / cannot now have; and through this process connecting with a deeper, truer sense of self; and working out how they can live a more authentic life in the time that is left to them.

Person-centred therapy is founded on a premise that providing a certain type of relational stance supports the client's natural developmental processes.¹³ Phenomenological / existential therapeutic processes are designed to enable the clients meaning making processes.¹⁴ In simple terms then, there seems a hand-in-glove fit between the midlife developmental transition and an approach that integrates person-centred and phenomenological / existentialist approaches. Both can also embrace the transpersonal aspect of our experiencing, which is important given the extensive literature supporting the spiritual potential of midlife transitions (see Footnote 3).

However, somewhat at odds with the person centred / existential stance, we can as therapists embrace the pragmatic and real: when people feel lost it is helpful to have a map to help them navigate the terrain and find a direction that they want to travel in.

Some eight years ago, based on clinical experience, an extensive review of theological and psychological literature on midlife, and my own transition, I became a cartographer and devised a 'map' of the tasks of midlife as a guide to working with people undergoing a midlife transition. This map involves four key 'tasks' of midlife which are set out below:

LIFE REVIEW

It seems important to take stock and have some sort of evaluation as to where a client has landed in terms of their aspirations, life history and choices. More often

than not people, especially in a post-modern age, have aspects of their life that feel disjointed and dislocated, and it is helpful to have some form of creative process to contain this gathering of interrelated and disconnected strands (and what can be seen as 'scraps') of a life together, to see where patterns and coherence emerge. For example, using an image of a tree, and the concentric rings of a tree trunk to represent growth, recognises that aspects of our lives are layered and nestled together: 'new growth forms around the old, rather than replacing it'.¹⁵ An alternative image, representing a sharp, irregular wholeness, could be the Shard building (at London Bridge) as a metaphor for a coming together of different 'shards' of life into a structured form that can be viewed as a whole.

As part of this process the client may begin to connect with a deeper sense of who they feel themselves to be and what they deeply desire.



RADICAL ACCEPTANCE OF EVERYTHING

A necessary task of mid-life is the embracing and acceptance of what has gone before and of ourselves, especially of the 'shadow' traits which a client may, perhaps for the first time, be able to acknowledge (moving through difficult emotions) as part of themselves. Palmer expresses well the sense of embracing the whole:

'My life is not only about my

strengths and virtues; it is also about my liabilities and limits, my trespasses and my shadow. An inevitable though often ignored dimension of the quest for wholeness is that we must embrace what we dislike or find shameful about ourselves' (p.6).¹⁶

Acceptance involves also the letting go of some of a person's dreams and ambitions, and accepting that in reality these are unlikely to be realised in their remaining lifetime. There are real world limitations associated with the passing of time, and Palmer urges us to look too, at the paradoxical guiding effect brought about by the ways and opportunities that like doors have firmly closed to us, as well as the ways and opportunities that did open up for us.

The outcome of the process of taking stock and looking realistically at ourselves, our limitations and our boundaries, is an opportunity to free up our energy from self-reproach and regret, in order to think creatively about what now could be possible for ourselves and our future.

'CONVERSION'

I have yet to find a universally relevant term for this process, but conversion points to a process that is exemplified by religious conversion. When people find faith, they tell and retell their story within a unifying narrative of newly discovered meaning for their life. This telling and retelling is a transformative agent of change in that, in and of itself it enables the living out of the ideals and virtues signified by the meaning of purpose that propels the conversion: see for example Stromberg.¹⁷

It is certainly true that midlife is a time when many people do discover or re-commit in a new way to a religious faith (see for example the novelist Tolstoy), but for others a way through the transition is to formulate new or revised 'principles for living' that will

carry them forward into the next phase of their life. For clients this will function as their 'conversion narrative' as they rehearse and retell it, becoming the mechanism by which their future life can take shape.

VOCATION

Fowler (see Footnote 2) urges us to think not in terms of 'Christian vocation but rather the Christian idea of human vocation' (p.107). Here he is linking the idea of finding purpose in our life as being inextricably bound up with God's purposes for our lives. He is insistent that these arguments relate to all of us, to ordinary people, for seemingly ordinary purposes. It could be for example, that we see friendship as our vocation, or supporting work colleagues.

As in all the areas outlined above this is delicate and sensitive therapeutic work, culminating in a process of great value:

'When we deal with the question of vocation, we are engaging in an area of great mystery and great sacredness. There is truthfully nothing more sacred to a man or a woman than the meaning of his or her life, his or her value or purpose in being' (p.106).

This sense of vocation in midlife has been conceptualised by Erikson as 'generative'¹⁸ the idea of giving back, of nurturing the next generation. That is certainly true for many who have the opportunity to do so. However, the work of therapy is to tease out what is of value for the client and their life, rather than which is expected or valued in the world. It might be to be a good dad, neighbour, friend. It could be to pursue a new career or direction, to develop relational boundaries for the first time etc. The possibilities are as numerous and unique as the clients who grace our therapy rooms.

Notes

- 1 Brewi, J. & Brennan, A. (2004) 'Mid Life Spirituality, Psychological and Spiritual Perspectives', Maine, Nicolas-Hays Inc.
- 2 Fowler, J. (2000) 'Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian, Adult Development and the Christian Faith', San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.
- 3 Rohr, R. (2012) 'Falling Upwards, A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life', London, SPCK.
- 4 Jung, C. (1933/2001) 'Modern Man in Search of a Soul', Abingdon, Routledge.
- 5 Bridges, W. (2004) Transitions, 'Making Sense of Life's Changes', 2nd Edition (25th Anniversary Edition), Cambridge MA, Da Capo Press.
- 6 Prochaska, J. Norcross, J. DiClemente, C. (1994/2006) 'Changing for Good, A Revolutionary Six Stage Program for Overcoming Bad Habits and Moving Your Life Positively Forward', New York, Harper Collins.
- 7 From Eliot's 'Four Quartets - The Dry Salvages'.
- 8 Hunter, S. Sundel, M. ed. (1989) Midlife Myths: 'Issues Findings, and Practice Implications', London, Sage Publications.
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- 11 May, G. (2005) 'The Dark Night of the Soul, A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth', New York, Harper Collins.
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- 18 Erikson, E. (1982/1997) 'The Lifecycle Completed, Extended Version' New York, WW Norton & Cod.

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