

MIDLIFE - IV

TIME FOR REASSESSMENT

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podcast link:

<https://anchor.fm/boscom/episodes/1-2-Psyche--Soul--47-e1198r3>

Hello, this is Jose Parappully, Salesian priest and clinical psychologist at Sumedha Centre for Psychospiritual Wellbeing at Jeolikote, Uttarakhand, with another edition of Psyche & Soul.

The emotional awareness of mortality that seeps into our consciousness at midlife has profound impact on our psyche and soul and on our way of being in the world.

First of all it leads to a changed sense of time. When we were young, time was quite elastic, infinite. We could stretch time to make place for all that we wanted to accomplish. We could dream of a hundred things to do, and we had the confidence we had enough time to accomplish all that. Not so now. Time is now experienced as finite, restricted. Focus shifts to the limited time-left-to-live, on how to live it more meaningfully.

We experience an urgency in terms of accomplishing something worthwhile. This is all the more true if we feel that our life so far has been not very meaningful or productive. As psychologist Roger Gold puts it: “Whatever we must do must be done now.” How we spend the limited time available to us becomes significant. University of Chicago psychology professor Bernice Neugarten observes: “Both sexes, although men more than women, talked about the new difference in the way time is perceived. The awareness that time is finite is a particularly conspicuous feature of middle age.”

One consequence is the pressure to reassess life and its priorities.

Assessment of Life and its Priorities

According to Neugarten, reassessment of self – reviewing the past and looking to the future – is the “prevailing theme” at mid-life. Midlife forces us to look at where we are and how we came to be here. In this reassessment we take stock, noting where we are, what we have achieved, and how we feel about life in general. We assess our current priorities, dreams, commitments, career, values, beliefs and so on.

We ask ourselves: What have I done with my life? What has brought me to where I am? What has happened to my dreams? What do I want now? What is really important to me? How do I want to live out the rest of my life? We evaluate particularly our careers, chosen professions, our dreams, values and beliefs, experience of intimacy in marriage, commitment to the religious life, and so on.

Developmental psychologist Daniel Levinson referred particularly to reassessment and modification that occurs in marriage during midlife. The same can be said of religious commitment as well. In their late thirties and early forties the married and the religious tend to

address seriously commitment problems that they had previously ignored or only dimly acknowledged.

Both the married and those committed to religious life examine various forces that have been at work in their lives, how they have lived out their dreams and how all these have contributed to the current state of their commitment, and the level of satisfaction it provides them.

Both the married and the religious are likely to see their commitment very differently at midlife than when they first made it. They may come to the conclusion that marriage or religious life is not what they had expected it to be. Or that they may have committed themselves to marriage or religious life for all the wrong reasons. They may now conclude that there is little hope that their current commitment will bring them reward or satisfaction. They may, consequently, seek to relinquish their current commitment and bind themselves to a new one.

The reassessment of life and subsequent change of course resulting from death awareness is beautifully illustrated in the Akira Kurosawa film “*Ikiru*.” In the film a staid and aging bureaucrat who has been very hard on people, and who has spent his entire life looking through and stamping permission papers, and had done little to help people is diagnosed with cancer. He keeps the diagnosis a secret, but makes an evaluation of his life. He realises to his great dismay how he has wasted his life, and tries desperately to give it some significance by giving permission for a children’s park that he had held up for years and helps to construct it. He then dies with a happy song in his heart, sitting on a swing in that same park on a cold wintry night.

Reflection Exercise

Sit with the following questions and see what answers come into consciousness.

- *What have I done with my life so far?*
- *What has brought me to where I am?*
- *How do I really feel about the way I have lived so far?*
- *What more do I want from life?*
- *How do I want to live out the rest of my life?*

Prayer

There is an incident in the Gospel of John (Chapter 1, 35-38) where two disciples of John the Baptist behind Jesus as he passes by. Jesus notices someone following him looks back, sees the two and asks them, “What do you want?”

We could imagine Jesus asking us the same question. What answer would be give? We could imagine the response Jesus gives to our answer and then may be allow a fantasy conversation develop between him and us. ... End the prayer thanking Jesus for spending time wit you and talking to you.

May your weekend journeying be happy and safe. Be blessed.
Thank you for listening.

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