

AWAKENING TO MIDLIFE

Jose Parappully SDB, PhD
sumedhacentre@gmail.com

Podcast link:

<https://anchor.fm/boscom/episodes/2-44-Psyche--Soul--95-evuotv>

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.

During the past few weekend podcasts I have been presenting on mental Health and illness. This week I begin a series of podcasts on the Midlife transition which has a profound impact on our lives. This weekend I focus on “Awakening to Midlife.”

.....

Midlife is a bridge between the first and second half of life. Midlife transition usually occurs roughly between 35 and 50, most commonly between the ages 40-45

In a study by psychologist Sheila Murphy of 137 women between the ages of 30 and 60 who responded to questions on midlife transition, for example, 66 percent indicated that they were experiencing or had experienced such a transition. Sixty seven percent of these identified the 35-45 year bracket as the time of transition.

However, as Bernice Neugarten, the University of Chicago professor who specialised in the study of older people observed, for many people chronological age is often not the marker for midlife. Rather, it is experienced more in terms of their positions in life – family, career - and the experiences they go through.

The period from the late 30’s to late 40’s is for most people the most fruitful and satisfying in terms of professional work and creativity. Midlife is a time when we are likely to feel we have reached the top of professional and personal accomplishment; accumulated prestige and expertise and feel quite good about ourselves and life in general. It is toward the end of this fruitful and personally and professionally satisfying period that the rumblings of a midlife transition makes itself felt.

A TIME OF QUESTIONING AND SELF-DOUBT

During midlife our sense of purpose and meaning which was strong earlier, slowly drains away. We wonder, “What’s happening to me? Why am I doing what I am doing? What’s my life about?” Another side of our personality suddenly asserts itself. We find ourselves doing things out of character. For example, we might have been have been a very kind and patient person. Now we get easily irritated and speak harshly. We might have enjoyed and been happy with whatever work or ministry we were doing. Now its charm and attraction disappear and we wonder, “Why do I stick on to this ‘thankless’/ ‘useless’ job?” We long for something different and more fulfilling. We feel an urge to try out new things.

Or, we may not have cared much for relationships in the past. Now we begin to search for one and wish we had a very close friend. New longings for closeness and intimacy are stirred in us. Those committed to a celibate lifestyle might begin to wonder how it would be to have a sexual experience, or to be married, be a father, mother—have a child.

Married persons may wonder if they made a mistake in marrying the person they did. They may begin to fantasise about what it would be like, if they had not married or had married someone else.

More often than not these questions do not pop into our mind suddenly. Instead these intimations of midlife unfold slowly, beginning with a vague sense of discontent and disillusion. We want more than what life is currently offering us. Our earlier interests weaken or disappear and others arise to take their place. There can be a slow withering of our earlier ambition or passion for life.

However, the dynamics of midlife can also be ushered in suddenly and rather dramatically, especially in contexts where we experience a deep disappointment, loss or trauma. For example, an unexpected transfer, or discovery that we have cancer, or the sudden death of someone we love dearly can trigger the sudden onset of midlife transition.

A classic story of midlife discontent is that of Faust, the famous character created by the German writer Goethe. Coming to midlife, Faust finds that although he has mastered philosophy, medicine, and law thoroughly, he is fundamentally no wiser than a fool. He feels that in his pursuit of knowledge he has neglected to live life with passion, that he has wasted his youthful years. He yearns to regain his youth and passion, drink life to the full. At this juncture the devil in the disguise of a travelling salesman named Mephistopheles appears to him and promises to restore to him the passion of his youth, provided Faust sells his soul to him. Desperate, Faust agrees and makes a pact with the devil to salvage his wasted life.

For John Henry Newman, later Cardinal, and now a Blessed, midlife rumbling came at the height of his fame as an Oxford Scholar, as meaning and purpose disappeared and he floundered trying to make sense of his life and find new directions. That experience led him to pen the words of his now famous poem, giving expression to his inner anguish as well as trust that there will be light at the end of the tunnel:

*Lead, Kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom
Lead thou me on;
The night is dark, and I far from home,
Lead thou me on....*

Lead Kindly Light is not just a poem, it is autobiography. In it Newman gives expression to his own anguish at the disappearance of meaning and direction in his own life, and the need for light to see clearly the new pathways he has to tread.

This experience of midlife as a profound crisis is dramatically captured in the autobiography of Buz Aldrin, the second man, after Neil Armstrong, to walk on the moon. After achieving what he called “the most important goal of all,” Aldrin sank into depression. Going to the moon was the ultimate adventure and he had lived through its excitement. What more could he achieve now? Nothing really. He fell into what poets have described as “the melancholy of all things done!” His depression led to the break-up of his marriage and he got addicted to alcohol. He took anti-depressant medications, and sought help from psychotherapy. “My depression forced me, at the age of forty-one,” he wrote, “to stop and for the first time examine my life” This is what midlife does to us, whether it creeps upon us slowly or bursts upon us suddenly. It makes us stop in our tracks and examine our lives.

Midlife is the call of the “soul” for the more of life, for finding new directions and new passion. There are a number of typical dynamics that accompany this crucial developmental passage. We shall explore these in the coming weekends.

Introspection & Prayer

What does the phrase midlife transition evoke in you? What do you understand by it?

Has any of the midlife experiences and dynamics presented in this podcast been part of your life? If yes, how did these impact you?

Jesus was 33 when he began his public ministry. We can say he was just entering midlife. It was a time of a transition for him, from being a simple carpenter at Nazareth to being the Messiah. What might have been his feelings and concerns during this transition? My be you could spend a few minutes sharing with him your own life transition experiences and ask him to share with you the wisdom he gained through his own experiences.

Have a pleasant week end. Be safe. Be healthy. Be blessed.
Thank you for listening/reading.

Jose Parappully SDB, PhD
sumedhacentre@gmail.com

